Monster Girl Saga Vol1

Monster Girl Saga - I

Anonemoose

Chapter 1

My breath had turned to heaving gasps as my feet faltered on some alien forest floor and rare train of thought came to me; coming to terms with my life's imminent end. I tried to banish it, but as someone who had lived a life of thinking and hardly doing I found that quite impossible. It was also a likely explanation for my current fatigue. For now, I'd protect my pride and blame my relentless pursuers and continue to blaze ahead with reckless abandon. I had ceased to run some time ago and progressed to throwing myself forward instead. Endless walls of branches and brambles scraped past, sheering away at my skin. My face glistened with sweat, or it merely soaked with blood. Besides my ragged breathing and the sound of my own heart thumping inside my head there was the echo of leaves, twigs and soil crunching underfoot. An endless wall of trees around me is everything I could see. A large backpack filled to the brim with the scavenged remnants of my once humble abode swayed on my back and kept pulling me off balance. I thought of ditching it, but even if I escaped, with the food, water, blankets and gear inside, I surely wouldn't last long without it. I would buy time, not my survival.

Despite how dire my situation was, and despite a primal survival instinct taking control of my actions, I needed to keep my mind on what lay ahead. That of course meant not just the trees I weaved through and the roots and stones I leaped over. A thick canopy overhead almost blocked the light of the sun above entirely, but it also kept the air cool. Not without leaving an ominous atmosphere which added to my own sense of dread. If it were not for the excitement of the chase and being scared shitless by the prospect of being captured, no doubt I would be left with an eerie paranoia. Whatever this place is, if it were alive, it no doubt had a sense of humor to cut right to the chase. Literally.

A few more leaps and bounds carried me to a short overlook. The drop was only a few meters down so I hastily slid down the wall of mud. Going around is simply not an option. My pursuers were spread out in a fan, and they'd catch me before I found a safer way down. If I were too slow I'd lose my lead, so to keep my momentum, I dared to vault the crest. Disaster struck when the eroded soil did not hold my weight at the bottom half of my decent. Part of the slope gave way, and both my feet shot forward from under me continuing into the air and taking the rest of my body with them. It was left to my back to break my fall instead as I crashed into a pile of leaves, bush and dirty soil. It took tremendous straining of my abdomen to stop my head from joining my back. Luckily my backpack cushioned the impact with the

ground.

By my waist a clatter of leather and steel, a sword and scabbard dislodged from my hip. I had almost all but forgotten its monotonous and constant swaying off my hip. Scared, fatigued and bruised I brought the hard leather to my chest and held onto it tight. I held onto it as though it were something fixed in place. Something that if I failed to hold onto I would fall through the forest floor to hell itself. It didn't matter that it was previously a toy, no more than a hobby item. Although real and sharp I knew any attempt on my part to use it would be laughable. A safety blanket nonetheless, and I'd willingly take any break I could at this point. I hoped it would have stopped more fights from its mere presence rather than win them. I ran from something I couldn't hope fight. If I felt I could, believe me that running is the last thing my pride would let me do. I was outnumbered and most likely outclassed. My pursuers were armed; and from what I saw of them when I after unfortunately met them, they do not treat prisoners with an ounce of civility.

Immersed in a bed of leaves and bushes I could see the sun through the trees towering above. I didn't have any strength left to block out the sun from shining directly into my eyes. It was far too late to try getting back onto my feet. All my muscles refused to listen, and my lungs felt like they were on fire. A foreboding rustling approached, there were at least four pairs of footsteps. Life can be so cruel. My first chance for rest in twenty minutes had arrived at last., but I wouldn't enjoy it long enough to savor the fresh air. I took in one long rush of air into my lungs to their bursting point and held it. The footsteps came to a stop, and that was all. I thought I'd be privilege to some secret conversation, the kind that would give me a hint as to how to get myself out of my current predicament. Once again life proves how unfair it can be. I wondered if I should have started counting in my head at this point, but I thought that would lead me to acknowledging my limits as lungs felt like they were liable to explode.

I could hear a patter of feet over the sound of my own heart beating while a shadow crossed over me. A small and feminine silhouette belonging to a female. Its sight sent me into a panic. Like a deer caught in headlights I froze completely, instinct dulled the pain and discomfort and I played dead. The woman had stopped to look around for a brief moment. My starving heart nearly came to a sudden halt when she stopped and stood still only a few short meters away. She inhaled, a few quick whiffs through her nose. A chilling thought came to me suddenly, as much as I wanted to banish it like so many of the others recently. Are my pursuers tracking me by smell? Are they

even human? They looked human, but then again, they had certain features that resembled pigs. Perhaps their sense of smell was just as keen?

There would be nothing I could do if that person standing there discovered I was hiding here. My body felt like an old unreliable car that refused to turn over no matter how many times I turned the key in the ignition. While coming to grips with the end of my life, the silhouette let out a short annoyed sigh and continued on its way. Life had decided to give me a break. Maybe she wasn't such a complete bitch after all.

Slowly my paralyzed body come back to its senses, and I indulged in precious oxygen. The taste of iron slowly left my mouth as I rested for what felt like minutes. I wasn't confident I had the luxury of a break, but I hadn't felt so good in a long time. When I finally gathered enough of my strength to prop myself up on my elbows and look over the bushes I had fallen into, a smell wafted into my sinus. Old and dry brush, leaves, and purple flowers.

"Lavender," I said quietly to myself and let out a laugh. "If they were tracking me by smell it makes sense why they lost me."

An idea suddenly came to me. I plucked as many bulbs of lavender as I could and stuffed them into my pockets, under my shirt's collar, everywhere I could fit them. It might just mask my smell and throw them off long enough for me to make a getaway. I couldn't shake how lightheaded I was when I rose to my feet. And I was afraid for a moment that I'd collapse again with a loud echoing thud. By holding my weight up on nearby tree trunks, I managed to drag myself onward until I felt the dizzying nausea fade away. My precious and eagerly anticipated second wind had come at last. My stumbling steps soon returned to normal; and with my legs limbered, up I broke out into a jog; and confident with my feet after that, I broke out into a run. If I broke out of the treeline, or if I found a river I'm sure I'd be able to find my way to civilization. Those brutes back there were all armed; they had to be forged somehow. Their prisoners were clothed; those had to be made somewhere.

If I could find someone, anyone who would listen, I could find a way to get back home. All I had to do was keep running till I reached safety. How long have I been out? Has anyone noticed I've been gone? How much longer did I have to run? I'm sure both my parents would be worried sick if I didn't answer the phone after so long. I'm shut-in, I'll be honest with myself there, so I don't think my friends would probably notice if there went AWOL without a word for a week.

These kinds of thoughts circled around inside my head as I pressed on. It showed just how far I'd come from the edge that I could worry about others again. Although that attitude made it worse when disaster returned.

Ten meters ahead, a woman walked out from behind a tree. Turning her head, she looked right at me as I came to a sudden skidding halt a few meters out of arm's reach. My eyes saw the world through a monochrome lens. Time slowed as my eyes locked onto hers and hers onto mine. This woman, this human woman, reached up to my shoulder, so I looked down at her and she up at me. She wore a lazy expression, droopy, almost goofy in its appearance. She looked human, or so I had thought at first. Sticking out from her messy and short mop of wavy vanilla colored hair were a pair of floppy pig's ears.

It wasn't some mere costume play going on here. This girl had no human ears, and the pig ones moved independent of her body's swaying. Her skin flushed a healthy hue of pink. Her frame, curvaceous, albeit a little on the chubby side. My eyes quickly drew elsewhere, namely the massive wooden war mallet resting behind head and across her shoulders. It's not something a carpenter would use. She hardly wore anything at. Straps of leather, bits of cloth, more like a makeshift two-piece swim suit than leather armor. Leather gloves, vambraces, shin guards and open sandals. Was this some kind of joke? Impractical, my situation is borderline silly. What kind of warrior would be so inappropriately dressed for battle like this? Exposing so much skin needlessly. While I stared, staggered and in a daze, she continued to study me as well. Her droopy face turned into a peculiar smile. That smile struck my heart like a finger over an instrument's string. That kind of smile couldn't be mistaken for anything other than one simple thing.

Come on over here. Let's have some fun.

With a soft thud, she dropped her hammer on the forest floor. The girl bent forward; her gaze still meeting mine. She cradled her breasts in her forearms. Then I noticed just how profound those voluptuous curves were. What kind of cup are those? An 'F'? A 'G"? Why were they shaped like something you'd see on some cover girl in a trashy magazine? Either puberty had been kind, or gravity smiled on her.

She took a step forward; her hips shook seductively with each step. From her plump rear, a curly pig's tail swayed back and forth with each step. It was absurd. It jutted out from her tailbone, not from

elsewhere like a cheap bargain bin sex toy. There were no strings attached; it swayed and twitched in a way that a real tail would. Letting her breasts drop, bounce and sway; she reached out with both her hands open toward my face to cradle my cheeks with a gentle and droopy expression on her face. Time seemed as though it were being held back by the gravity of the situation. My mind raced, my body froze in place... Except for someone's lower nether region which had long ago begun stirring to life at the sight of this pig-woman. Her face complete with light green eyes and a cute button nose came ever closer.

There wasn't any time left for hesitation. Her hands were only a breath's width away, close enough to feel now. This being is human though. At least she looked human. She was mostly human, but I couldn't shake an instinctual gut churning feeling deep down inside me which rejected that. My feelings of awe were burned away in an instant, when my fear caught up and my fight or flight reaction took over. A hiccup shook my body back to its senses and quick enough so that I could I swat her hands away. I sprang backward, pushing her aside violently and gripped the hilt of my sheathed sword with my free hand. My face contorted in anger as I prepared myself for a fight, and I carefully watched her reaction. I mustered up a bit of saber rattling, but that's all.

My fierce expression and willingness to fight evaporated in an instant. Her hands lowered to her sides as though they'd gone completely limp, and she looked at me with a distraught and hurt expression. That droopy look on her face had changed to a complicated expression defined by disappointment and sadness. Her eyes wet as though she were about to cry. We simply stared at each other again, and she raised one of her hands toward me again. She implored me to take it. My face softened, but I held steadfast and defensive. Her seductress's expression vanished. Her expression turned into one of forlorn longing. Even the scent of her breath was beyond all my expectations. It didn't smell like a diet of forest tubers and truffles and no access to toothpaste or rudimentary dentistry. Her breath had a sweet scent to which caused my own heart to flutter. It smelt of perfume, a cluster bomb of pheromones that hit me square in the sinuses. Rather than tug at my heart strings like before, it plucked and played them like an instrument.

And that's what really scared me. I turned on my heels and ran as fast as I could. I didn't hear any voice calling out to me from behind, I didn't hear any pursuing footsteps and I didn't feel her presence following me.

I didn't make it far before a loud and low tone noise blared between the trees. It sounded like a conical horn. It caused me to come to a stop as it carried on for several seconds. When I stopped to listen, it came from behind. I turned to find its source. Between the trees, barely in sight, the girl from before was holding up a viking horn toward the sky and blowing into it. The long sustained toot came to an end. She followed it with a much shorter note and then a third. There was a brief moment of silence before another horn blared in the distance where I had been running before. Then another to my left, then my right, three, four, five, the number of horns reverberating throughout the forest increased. They were close, far and in-between in all directions.

Gritting my teeth, I cursed out loud, “Shit. So it was a trap.” That my intuition and instincts had seen through her deception gave me little comfort.

The entire forest had come to life with the sound of alarm. Birds took flight into the air, small rodents scurried away on the ground and in the trees in all directions. I wasn't sure which direction was which anymore. Spinning around in a panic, I tried to gauge which horns were close. I needed to get a hold of myself and continue running, but out from the bushes three women emerged. Their heights were similar, as were their faces to the girl from before. They must be related on some level. The gravity of the situation caught up with me again. I'm lost in a strange forest surrounded and being hounded by an entire clan of warrior pig-women. Their faces didn't appear menacing, they all shared the same droopy expression plastered on their faces, lugging around makeshift weapons of absurd size and weight and wearing armor so skimpy and revealing no sane person would wear that in battle. Their expressions were still playful, but it's obvious they were not interested in seducing me anymore. The way they carried and swung their weapons, they intended to use them to capture me by force. The three bounded their way toward me, and my flight instinct took.

They were surprisingly slow, outrunning them seemed to be child's play. Were they being conservative or did they not need to run? That last thought scared me quite a bit. If that was true, along with me being surrounded, running might be a waste of time as they try to tire me out till I couldn't possibly run anymore. A horn sounded off alarmingly close to my left as I dashed through the forest, and I took a sharp turn to my right to put distance between me and it. From in front of me another pig-woman appeared. She breathed deeply with a

hoarse rasp in her voice. Legs spread shoulder width apart, and her arms out as far as they could reach to block my passage between two large trees. To avoid a collision, I came to a halt. From my right, a short and chipper yell as another pounced out from my flank. She wrapped her arms around my arm and brought herself closer to me. Sandwiching my arm between her not so modest sized breasts.

She let out a giggle that would, in a situation that wasn't so frightening, sound absolutely adorable. She tugged and pulled on me, trying to fall backwards to the ground and bring me along with her. Since I had entered in a state of panic, I whipped my shoulder back and dragged my arm back across as hard and as violently as I could. With a yelp of surprise, I shook the girl off, sending her careening into the other girl. Like bowling pins, they landed in a heap making pained moans. Were they really so weak? The whole situation baffled me.

Another horn sounded off in alarm as a group ten of them materialized through the foliage behind me. I'd be completely surrounded if I kept standing around like an idiot, so I picked one direction and hoped it was the right one. If I had any luck left, it would lead me to the weakest flank. Taking off like a rocket, I hurdled over the heap of girls in front of me.

Horn after horn blared loudly again and again. Like a rat caught in a maze I dashed in one direction and then another trying to slip through my pursuer's net that encircled me. How many were there? By now I must have counted thirty and heard another forty on top of that. My predicament seemed to be getting worse and worse as the time between me running into them got steadily shorter. Suddenly, a small break in my misfortune presented itself. The sound of the horns had died off completely in front of me; and taking heart, I put the last of my strength into a full sprint; branches breaking off completely as I barreled through them. Meeting a slight incline, I stressed my leg muscles to ascend higher and higher until finally a break in the tree line appeared. I came to a sudden stop and stumbled. I realized too late, at the point where the trees ended, that beyond the horizon was nothing but sky. I fell to my hands and knees just before the edge. Below me a sharp incline went down some odd fifty or sixty meters. Mud and dirt held together by the spotted scattering of meager trees. A few rocks knocked over the edge tumbled down the hill. Picking up speed as they went, they slammed into and off the many trees and ricocheted in many directions. I pushed myself backwards and fell onto my bottom. The horns behind me were getting closer and climbing the hill behind me. I dragged my heavy body up off the ground and turned to face the tree line.

They began to materialize from behind the forest and formed a semi-circle. I'm sure there were more behind those I could see. I could hear them. They giggled and talked quietly amongst themselves, whispering to one another as they studied and watched me. I stood as tall as I could, puffed my chest out and squared my shoulders. Somewhere along the line I had lost all reason and regressed to some bestial state. Like a cornered animal trying to frighten off some predator I tried to look bigger. Predators preyed on the weak, right? They ignored how silly I looked and the group parted to let one pig-woman though. She was outlandishly dressed, a walking fashion disaster. Bits of metal which I assumed served as armor covered her instead of just leather rags alone. Of course, she's still skimpily dressed like the others. A flowing cape, a scruffy looking over sized beret and a patchwork multicolored scarf. She stood taller than the rest too, near my own height at least the very least. Everything about her was an exaggerated version of the others. Her height, her muscle definition, her breast size. All that meant one thing: Last, but certainly not least, the leader of the pig women had finally arrived.

The gap in the line broke even further as another group got dragged forward. A train of naked men, seven in total of various ages, build and appearance. Each man had been tied up; their necks and wrists connected with a long single stand of rope. Their escorts corralled them forward, pushed them violently to the ground and held them there. It wasn't necessary to abuse men with empty soulless eyes, but they appeared to take personal pleasure in it. From their expressions, I deduced it couldn't be anything other than sexual excitement. It wasn't one of professional satisfaction; these men looked like it had been a long time since they last had any fight in them. I had come face to face with the sight that had led me on this long chase once again. Not long before being dropped into this forest I had run into this group of human pig-women sexually abusing their prisoners.

To call them prisoners was probably incorrect, they were likely slaves. It had been an orgy, a sight I had never even seen before with my own eyes. Every one of these creatures seemed to be female. Not a male in sight. If that were true, then their capturing human men would make sense. They were not only slaves but sex slaves. Not a word was said while I watched in horror as these women were preparing an extra length of rope to add to the train. The others blocking the way still clamored in excitement, looking at their new toy. Their leader, their chieftain, raised her hand, and they all went silent. With that motion, they all quieted down. Their faces were rife with

disappointment. They appeared like children who had been denied a new toy to play with.

Snapping her fingers brought forward a trio of girls, they all labored to bring her a pole with a huge stone tied to the end of it. Another duo came from behind to unclasp her cape and retrieve her hat. After that, the trio took off her pieces of armor and gaudy clothes one by one until their leader stood before me completely naked. It was plain as day what would happen next. She spun that boulder on a stick around her with effortless ease in a little show of strength. It was all a show to intimidate me.

It worked.

Did she intend to beat me and then rape me? It certainly looked like she was putting on a show for her subordinates. Everything seemed like a calculated display of dominance. A big stick, the part about her removing her clothes, those were as big a hint as any other.

I looked to my left and right again, but there wasn't anywhere else for me to run. There is no way I could break through that many without being dragged down to the ground under their weight alone. Their leader took her first steps toward me, brimming with confidence, a droopy face like the others filled with a playful malice in it, licking her lips in anticipation.

I had this brief moment in time to collect my thoughts. My mind raced with clarity for the first time since I had woken up in this strange place. It had been sometime after midnight. I had been in my apartment, the rest of in the city buzzed around me. I had a lecture early next morning; I stayed up too late wasting my time on the Internet to know whatever that professor talked about that day. I was tired, dead tired. From the depths of my slumber, a raucous noise and tremors tossed me from my bed. It had felt like an earthquake. Not only had I been tossed not side to side, but up and down as well. When it stopped, the view from my window had changed to somewhere in the forest. I was dumbfounded then, and I still am now. I thought it had been a dream, but I could feel pain, and it all seemed very real. There wasn't anything else. Just myself, my apartment and a forest. The rest of the building didn't make it. Perhaps that's most absurd part of it. Everything I had known now crumbled as a worthless lump of concrete on the forest floor; torn out from the rest of the building and hurled through what could have very well been time and space for all I knew.

Parts of my room were collapsed under piles of heavy rubble. That's how my day started. At least fortune had decided to cut me some slack; I had not been crushed under it. A small comfort, but I'd take it.

Most of my belongings were lost, buried under mud or destroyed. Open pipes and torn wiring hung everywhere and the whole room looked like it could collapse at any moment. I took what I could scavenge and left, but nothing I had left could have prepared me for this. My home had been torn loose and tossed with wild abandon like Dorothy being tossed into The Land of Oz. But this wasn't a dream or some perverse reflection of my home. I was in an alien land that I apparently shared with a group of nearly human women who were prepared to enslave me.

My situation was bleak. My options were limited. I had to come to terms that this couldn't be a dream. I could reason it away, but every sensation I felt got in the way of that. I didn't want to be a slave. I'm afraid of being beaten, used and abused. I wanted to go home. It didn't matter that I was alone. It didn't matter to me that I might otherwise starve, dehydrate or get sick and die in this forest. If I could have a chance at trying, that would be better than what waited for me if I gave up now. I just wanted to go home. I wanted a single chance to get me on the way back home. I wanted to see a friendly face. I didn't want to run and hide. I wanted to be in control. I didn't want to be yanked and pulled around by my circumstances. I didn't want to be afraid anymore.

But I had one thing left that I could do, so I broke the silence first. I forced a wry grin and stared back at the pig women who were taking their sweet time but were slowly getting closer.

“A good effort," I said mocking them, "but you've still left me with another option.”

I said such a bold thing, but in reality, my legs where shaking, and my teeth were nearly chattering. My heels shuffled backward until they met the crest of the cliff. Their leader hesitated, and her underlings all stopped as well. The look on her face must be that of disbelief. I could hardly believe I was going to do this, and the no doubt crazy look in my eyes told her all about it. I didn't know if she could understand me; she probably didn't, but she still didn't say a word. Her arms flailed around in an effort to direct the others. It didn't matter now that she had nothing to say to me. No word she could say could call me back now. She made a move to start charging toward me, but it was too late.

I didn't want to be afraid. I wanted to take control and do something. I had been pushed this far, and I had pushed myself to this point. Her hesitation gave me the opening I needed. I didn't know if this would work. I didn't even know if I would survive. I turned around and jumped off.

I got good air before coming back down. For a moment, I surfed on the sheer edge of dirt and mud with one foot forward while the other dug into the earth behind me. Keeping my balance, however, ended up being something that was meant to be. Dirt flung itself into the air as the soles of my shoes scrapped over the surface. My arms were outstretched as I tried in vain to keep my balance, but I'd have to avoid the trees and shrubs in my way first. I pushed off one, but it didn't slow my down at all. My speed kept getting more extreme, and a simple collision wasn't limited to a little tap for very long.

Maintaining a steady and slow pace proved impossible. I went into this knowing that, but I still tried mitigating the risk of tumbling over and cracking my head against something. Gravity sped up my descent toward terminal velocity without an ounce of sympathy to my situation. I hadn't thought this through at all. This was a bad choice, and it became more apparent as my descent got faster and faster. The sparse vegetation hazards got thicker and thicker the further down the cliff I flew.

This seemed like the better decision just a few moments ago, given the option between having to fight that woman and her groupies or do some off-season skiing down a double diamond run without the skis. It seemed there was a greater chance I may get out of this predicament alive. Now I started having doubts. My fears were confirmed when I hit my first tree after reaching max speed. It's a meager little thing, clinging desperately to the side of the cliff, so it broke when I hit it, and it failed to slow me down at all. I flipped over and tumbled like a rag doll after impact. All I could do now was tuck myself in as small as I could manage and guard my head.

A rock bashed into my hip, and my forearm slammed against another tree. My tight ball broke, and I started tumbling like log down a hill. I started to slow down at bit, but my back hit another scraggly tree and uprooted it. I tumbled over and over, now carrying part of the vegetation down the cliff with me. My body went head over heels over the rough earth. Before I knew it, I came to a sudden and violent stop at the bottom. Instead of a crunch from my bones, I heard a rustle. I had plummeted right into a thicket of old brush and withered leaves.

My head slammed into the dirt, and I saw stars; my vision went black. I could hear the blaring sound of horns, but their blaring got quieter as my eyelids got heavier. Am I dying, or could it be that I was actually dreaming? It still hurt like hell, so I couldn't be sure. That was the last thought I had before losing consciousness completely.

Chapter 2

What had been a blissful silence after my chaotic ordeal was interrupted by an incessant ringing in my right ear. I slowly stirred and grit my teeth against it, yet it refused subside. It eventually forced my slumbering body to wake. I found myself laying on my back and looking toward an orange colored sky. I shook my head, and the memories of my decent returned to me. Just how stupid was I? How many times did I have to hear people say, “No matter what your life is what is most important”? Certainly not enough. I had brashly decided freedom was more important. Maybe I wasn't dead, but perhaps I was on my way there. I wiggled my toes and felt the constrained walls of my shows.

“At least I'm not paralyzed,” I said out loud to comfort myself.

I bent my knees, and they sounded off with audible cracks that sent shivers through my body. It hurt, but they moved. I was fortunate that it wasn't an unbearable excruciating pain that would indicate broken bones or worse, being unable to move them at all because of a broken spine. I rotated my shoulders and flexed my elbows. They also began to crack and creak, but they moved with only a mild piercing pain. I tried to sit upright, but I hardly had the strength in my abdomen. Enduring a great amount of pain, I struggled and was finally rewarded with the privilege to sit upright. Pushing with my legs I then stood upright, forcing myself to take a few weak steps and slump sideways against a tree. Looking back up the sharp incline where I had tumbled down I saw from here that it was obscured. Since the sky had turned orange, it was at least dusk. I had probably been out for a number of hours, perhaps in and out of consciousness. If they hadn't followed and dragged away my hurting body with them by now, they may have given up on me. If I was lucky they may have left me for dead. I finally became aware of my injuries once I had woken from my drowsy state.

I was suffering from a sudden onset of numerous cuts and gashes all over my body. My forehead felt like it had accumulated a layer of caked blood, no doubt from a serious gash that had the common decency to heal on its own. It still left me with the serious headache when I acknowledged its existence. Various bruises covered my body as well, the source of all my pain. I hadn't hit anything at an odd angle or directly to break anything, but I had taken a serious tumble down that hill. My shirt was torn in various places. Some areas caked with dry blood. My jeans were not any better for wear either, at least they could still serve as clothing. It felt and looked as though it

were mid-spring; it may still get cold at night.

This wasn't the time to be waiting around though. I looked up again and saw that I was downwind of a gust that was currently blowing. My smell wasn't going to carry up the hill and give me away to those pig-women, but that wasn't going to last forever. The wind could change at any time. Numerous bulbs of crushed lavender were still lining my clothes and filled my pockets to the brim. I wasn't sure just how well it would work if they had caught on to how I was trying to hide my scent. I propped my back against the tree and slid down to the ground. Slipping my backpack off and opening the zipper, I rummaged through its contents. A crushed plastic water bottle that I drank in one sitting. A few mangled and twisted granola bars I devoured in haste, and I was then out of food. I sat there satisfied, hurting, but satisfied for a few minutes. I pulled out a small first aid kit; with gauze and bandages I cleaned, covered and bound what wounds I could. After resting for what must have been thirty minutes my strength was finally returning; I dragged my body up leaning against the tree behind me.

I tried to take a step, but it hurt like hell. I searched the forest floor for a stick, anything to use for support. A clatter at my waist reminded me of the scabbard. I untied it from my waist; and with the sword safely still stowed inside, I rested my weight on it and hobbled away. I was looking for a road, creek, river or lake. Smoke tumbling up into the sky would also be a welcome sight. I had enough water for maybe another three days. I would begin to starve starting tomorrow, but for now I had to press on. Forging on ahead, the sun, star, whatever its name was in this place, had disappeared behind the horizon some time ago. I then watched as two moons, one large one small, rose and began to move across the night sky together.

The night was bright. Brighter than a moonlit night in the woods back home. I hadn't become sleepy after a few hours of hiking, and the light from the moons allowed me to move on without worry of misplacing a step. At this rate, I would put some serious distance between myself and the pig-women. It was a welcome thought that they would soon be removed from my list of worries. My body had limbered up quite a bit as well, the stiffness had mostly gone away and I was left only with the tenderness of the various bruises over my body. Instead of a crutch, I was able to use my sword as a cane instead.

As my trek continued, I came across a strange phenomenon. A rolling mist had appeared suddenly, billowing at my feet. I looked up toward the starry sky and saw hardly a cloud in sight. I couldn't shake how odd it was. Pushing further through the foliage the mist became

thicker. Eventually, I came to a clearing in the middle of the forest, and there was a small pool of water. It was draped in steam. It had to be some sort of natural hot spring. I rushed to the water's edge, stripping my tattered and torn shirt off as I did. Kneeling at the edge, I cupped my hands together and dashed water against my face and body, scrubbing them hard with my tattered shirt as a rag. I was still covered in caked blood, dirt and grime, and I was not going to pass up this opportunity to wash myself. As the water cascaded across my skin it stung. It stung really bad. It was hot. Not too hot but unexpectedly so. It had to be between forty or fifty degree water. I clenched and sucked in air through my teeth in an attempt to bear the sudden pain, but I could certainly feel the layers of blood and grime wash off my face as a reward.

My eyes went bloodshot red from the hot water, and I struggled to open them again. Before being able to see anything, I was able to hear something. A few faint splashes from the water. When I was finally able to open my eyes again, I spotted a series of ripples in the water moving towards the edge. I slowly looked up to follow them back to their source. The tree branches and leaves above rattled and shook as the wind suddenly picked up. Much of the hovering mist was taken away with it, and standing there in the middle of the pond was a woman. She stood only three meters away. Kneeling, I looked up at her and noticed she was submerged up to her thighs and still partly obscured by the mist.

Illuminated by the moon and starlight she stood there with her face looking up toward the sky, her hands behind her neck and back, her arms against the side of her head and her elbows pointing directly toward the sky. Long silky and wet strands of red auburn hair billowed down her shoulders, draped across her chest and down her back. Her chest was heaved upwards on display, a marvelous and beautiful sight to behold. Their size couldn't be less than a D, and their shape was perfectly sculpted. Her skin was a golden bronze without a tan line to be seen. Two pink nipples crowned her twin mounds, and they blended seamlessly into her flawless skin.

My eyes continued their decent downwards to the svelte curvature of her waist before they curved back out over her wide hips to her lithesome legs. Her stomach was perfectly flat, punctuated by a thin oval shaped navel. Her abdomen looked toned and athletic, her whole body seemed to follow this trend: an hourglass figure every trace of unnecessary fat collected on her chest, leaving behind only taut muscle elsewhere. I couldn't stop my admiring and curious gaze from going further as it traced over her womanhood. Laid bare and

unobstructed for me to see. She had all the hallmarks of a young, very attractive, very athletic yet voluminous woman.

When I looked back up, my eyes met with hers. She had noticed me sitting here on my knees running my eyes over her body. My eyes slowly focused in; it took me what felt like minutes to take in the sight. I felt like I was looking upon Helen of Troy. My heart, which had been beating quickly, felt like it had been seized and squeezed by some spectral hand. A face I'd only expect to see on a television screen or on the folds of a magazine. There wasn't any professional lighting, droplets of water streamed down her face so that any makeup would have vanished long ago, and my vision was certainly not being doctored by any photo editing program.

Her facial features were soft and very feminine. A pair of thin eyebrows crowned face. A small nose was sandwiched between a pair of fierce close set eyes and an unembellished yet full pair of lips. My eyes were quickly drawn into her own, and it was then that my beating heart stopped. Her irises were a bright luminescent amber. Her pupils were not rounded but rather slits. They looked as though they seemed to be at a halfway point between two extremes, a human eye and that of a reptile. Her eyes were like that of a predator; they belonged on a crocodile not a human being.

Her pair of long eyelashes fluttered a few times as she blinked in rapid succession every so often as she stared at me. I got the impression that her disbelief was almost as strong as mine. Her expression had not changed though. I could feel my own eyes were wide open by now; I was trying to keep a stoic face but was failing. The two of us merely watched one another. A similar feeling of instinctual dread I had felt earlier today quickly dawned on me. That feeling would soon be explained as the woman before me cautiously lowered hers arms back down. Her forearms, from just beyond the elbow joint down, were red reptilian scales. It appeared as though they were long gloves, rather, they looked like armored gauntlets. I would have assumed they were, but they flexed and had natural movements of their own. They were certainly not something that was worn on top of human flesh and bone. They were scaled like a crocodile's foot, the outside lined with thick armored scales and the underside, including her palms, soft like the underbelly of a snake.

Her arms ended in reptilian-like hands. Each with three thick fingers and a large opposable thumb. Each digit ended with a long ivory white claw. Crowning the sides of her head, where human ears should be, were a pair of red lizard-like fins. From behind her a thick

lizard's tail came to life swaying back and forth, the ridge of the tail was adorned by a very alarming sight. Along her tail a ridge of fire burned brightly from where it connected to her back to the very tip. It must have been about three quarters of a meter in length. The fire illuminated the entire clearing, competing with the moonlight, and it was starting to burn a little brighter the longer we stared at each other. There was no way around it; she was a different type than the others before, but this girl standing naked in the spring before me was not quite human. Experience caused my blood to run cold.

Her eyes calmly moved away from mine at last, and it felt as though a pressure was lifted off my body, and I could breathe normally again. She looked to my side where she fixated on something. I followed her gaze and laying on the grass next to me was my sword in its scabbard. I thought about it from her perspective. A shirtless man poised on his knees with a weapon laying beside him has gotten this close to a naked defenseless woman in the middle of nowhere without another soul around.

I immediately tried to defuse the situation, “Look. I don't mean any-”

I didn't have any time to finish. Despite how high the water surrounding her was, she crouched down and kicked off the bottom of the spring and flew backwards. The spring was small, and from her standing start she flew backwards about 3 meters landing on the opposite shore. It was a perfect 10 point landing. It was so remarkable that I couldn't help but have my mouth agape. Standing there on the shore, I caught another sight. From just below her knees, much like her forearms, she was covered by hard reptilian scales that looked like a pair of red scaled armored greaves. Instead of human feet, she balanced on reptilian claws, three large and white clawed toes with claw tipped heel. She thrust her right claw into a nearby bush and with a rattle of leather pulled forth a sword, a massive two-handed falchion. With a flourish, she twirled the sword around with ease, and she locked eyes with me again bringing her sword to rest at her hips; the sharp point directed at toward me. Her expression was full of killing intent. My feeling of dread overflowed and become abject terror. If this continued she looked prepared to strike me down.

I pulled myself up off the ground and took a stance. The situation had escalated quickly, and I wanted desperately to avoid a fight. I was sure I would lose it if it came to that. A part of me felt that the fight had already begun so, in my left hand, I picked up my own scabbard and tattered shirt. My right hand I kept far off to the side, open and fingers spaced out to show I didn't intend to try anything. I

tried to appear to be the least threatening I could. I bowed my head a bit and tried to back away. If I made it appear as though I was going to retreat she may decide to back down. This meeting was a mistake after all, and I didn't intend to spy on her bathing; I didn't plan to attack her either. I definitely did not want to fight; I just wanted to carry on. The lizard-woman did not seem the least bit interested in any retreat, her own or my own.

Like a taut elastic band let loose, she took off. Darting off to the right, she began to circumnavigate the pool, dashing without a doubt toward me. The speed at which she moved alarmed me. My fight or flight kicked in immediately, and time seemed to slow down. I saw how fast she moved, kicking up dirt with those large clawed feet. Her sword trailed behind her as she ran with that sword arm behind her. I swung my right hand over to the hilt of my longsword and drew it quickly. By the time I managed to draw it, the woman was nearly within range and poised to strike. She brought the falchion over her head, ready to be brought down hard. I dropped my scabbard to the ground and wrapped my shirt around my left hand as I swung my longsword above my head.

Her strike came crashing down as my own sword came and met it. With my left hand wrapped I brought it up and held onto my own sword near the end, shifting my feet and preparing to brace myself. The hunk of iron she swung around connected with a sharp grating noise against the flat of my blade. The blow rang throughout the clearing. I felt like I had been hit by a truck. My knees bent; my right knee crashing into the dirt from the power of the blow. She struck down right at the mid point between my two hands. My elbows buckled and the flat of my own blade slammed against my face. With her other free claw, she reached over and began pushing down on the end of her own sword.

She didn't appear as though she was trying, despite that I was mustering all the strength in my legs to push her back. It was as though she was now holding back to draw things out. That was the impression I was given at least. She was slowly increasing the strength of her push while I got weaker and more fatigued. The twisted mess of steel resting on my face was starting to bruise, and my cheek bone creaked. Her face was getting closer to mine. I could feel her hot breath, and I'm sure my own heaving strained breaths were reaching her. Unable to bear the strain anymore I acted quickly. I removed my left hand suddenly, and the edge of her sword ran down my sword when I pushed the hilt up. Her blade slid down along the flat of the blade till it sunk into the ground. I got away without losing any fingers. A lucky break.

I backed away, rising off my knees and trying to get some distance. Her sword didn't stay stuck for long. With one effortless yank, she pulled her sword free and stepped forward into a horizontal chop to my side, I was forced to put both hands on the hilt to try fending it off. I had to do something and put some steel between her sword and my left kidney. The force of the blow pushed me off balance. I fell over sideways and landed on my shoulder. Rolling with the force of the blow I tumbled back up onto my feet to be met with a thrust. I swung my torso to the side so it flew past me. That was followed by another thrust forcing me to throw my torso in the opposite direction. Pulling her sword back and pivoting on her clawed feet she twirled around in a pirouette slashing the sword on a collision course with my head.

I was backing up recklessly, scared and panicked out of my mind. My reactions were instinctual, but I didn't have eyes in the back of my head, and my heel meet with a root, and I fell over; the sword passing over my face as I tumbled backwards onto the ground. I knew I was in trouble on the ground; I was defenseless, so I chose my right and rolled out-of-the-way. There was a loud thunk of iron on wood instead of flesh rending. I rolled back onto my feet holding my sword in front of me. The woman watched me back up a few steps, and I watched as she pulled her sword out with ease which had lodged itself deep in a root. Once more she lunged toward me, this time I ducked behind a tree. It clacked off the bark, and she followed me. Like a game of cat and mouse I kept circling the trunk to keep it between me and her. For a moment, I thought I had spotted her flash her teeth in an amused smile.

Her teeth were perfectly lined, but had a carnivorous twist to them. Mostly Human and pearly white, but with wicked canines, incisors and ridges that were razor sharp. They gave the glint in her smile an almost shark-like properly. At least the weight of her aggression didn't leave me impression that she intended to eat me. Yes, I was desperate enough to take solace that at least I wasn't being murdered to be eaten. It's hard to negotiate with someone who is hungry. Maybe if I just kept going a little longer she might start talking, or she could at least give me another chance to talk. Her intensity was so bright, like her tail, that I couldn't even spare a single breath for even one word. I really wanted to get a 'stop' out or something. My only other solace was that I could feel she wasn't trying like before. Maybe she was getting bored with this game? She had some intelligence because, while I was distracting myself, she caught onto my antics and was in my face quicker than I could escape back to the other side of the tree. I had to avoid another horizontal chop which sent me tumbling

backwards as her sword dug into the trunk like an axe. Once again, she effortlessly pulled it free again. She wasn't allowing me a second of rest I needed for me to start running.

I was breathing heavily, and she wasn't. That could only mean that, while I had pride in my own reflexes, my stamina and strength were quickly fading away. She wasn't showing any fatigue herself, and she'd proven her point by now. That's right! You win. You're better! Can I go home now? That's what I wanted to say, but she didn't seem eager to end fight anytime soon. I wasn't trained or skilled at all, I was just tying not to die by putting a piece of metal between hers and myself before it reached me. Her moves looked as though they were choreographed and refined. She had real talent and skill. I could barely muster the breath to keep myself going let alone spare some to talk some sense into her. She was fit. While I was not fat or lugging around any flab, I was not fit at all. This fight had to be decided sooner rather than later. I had no power to decide which way it would, and that terrified me; I was at her mercy. I thought of throwing my sword down and surrendering, but that look in her eyes made my heart scream at my mind that it would not work.

She had a look about her where she would strike me down. I couldn't explain it, I just felt that is how it would go. If I couldn't hold her off for much longer, if I couldn't surrender and if I couldn't run, the only option I had left was to fight. I had to attempt something, anything, to settle this. I had to attack. Steeling myself I stopped backing up and dug my feet down. The naked beautiful woman before me stopped as well. An eager smile appeared on her face. She could read my body language like a book. She figured out immediately that I was now prepared to fight at last. The flames on her tail erupted. They blazed in such a way that it may actually reflect her mood. I took a step forward, and she took a defensive stance. She was inviting me into attacking. I took another step toward her, she didn't budge, nor did she flinch. The third step I threw myself at her, and with both hands on the hilt I swung diagonally down. With ease, she swatted my blow away. I took a step back, and she didn't follow up. I took another step and swung back horizontally, a blow she swatted upwards. This time, I knew she wouldn't give me a second chance. I stepped out of the way, and as predicted she thrust forward. My gambit gave me just one chance, as I was off to the side with my sword held high; I brought it down.

How stupid of me to think I was fast enough... She recovered, once again parried the swing and repelled my attack. She parried it hard enough to push me backwards, sending my feet into a scramble as the weight of my sword pushed high into the air almost had me fall

backwards completely. I strained myself and regained my balance. She didn't move, instead she watched me flail backwards and regain my balance with those amber reptilian eyes of hers.

Very good.

That's what I thought those eyes of hers were saying to me while I regained my footing. That pissed me off a little. She was just toying with me at this point. Enjoying in a little sport while I was struggling with life and death. Like tearing wings off a fly, she was stepping all over my pride by playing with me like she was. I started to forget about surviving, I instead started to get angry. She stood there waiting so I indulged her. I lunged at her again, resting my sword on my right shoulder ready to swing down. She was too fast and knowledgeable for me to connect a blow; she had already shifted her sword to block my attack. So, as I approached I kept it where it was. She looked surprised for a moment; and during that opening, I raised my right leg and, as hard as I could, kicked at her knee. My shoe connected, but her knee didn't buckle, it didn't even budge. I felt color leave my face.

That's impossible, I thought.

She let me get that close, she fell for my feint and all that weight on her joint didn't even phase her. Once again, she got serious and brought her sword down on me while I was distracted by my own despair. I only just managed to bring my own into its path and once again was pushed backwards. She rolled her shoulders and limbered up. She wiped her toothy grin off and looked as though she was back to being serious once again. Did she lose interest? I couldn't even harm her. I suppose that's what she was thinking. If this was all a game to her, and I was no longer interesting as a possible threat, then she was probably just going to end the game now. I was overtaken by anger earlier, but I was now fighting against fear. My hands started to shake so I gripped my hilt harder. My legs started to shake next, but I tried to hide it. The next attack, it looked like she intended to make it count.

There wasn't any time to react. Like a switch had been flipped, she had gone from playful to dead serious. She readied herself, and she closed the distance with one kick off the ground into a lunge. She swung across hard. I tried to block it, but it was like a runaway freight train this time. It lifted me off my feet and threw me. Earlier she had just been knocking me off balance, but this time I was sent tumbling into the dirt, rolling over and over again. I came to a stop. I was

unarmed, my sword beside me, laying in the mud. The lizard-woman took deliberate strides toward me. I stole a glance, and she was poised to deliver a coup de grâce.

I scrambled to my feet, grabbing my sword on the way; it was backwards; I was holding it by the blade, but it didn't matter. Wrapped securely in my hands with my tattered shirt I was prepared. She was already lunging forward ready to strike. However, a longsword can be used just as it is. My body moved like I was driving a stake into the ground. I swung my sword over my shoulder by the blade in an act of desperation. Our blades crossed at the mid point, and they clashed mightily with an audible ring of metal. I was surely going to die, so I put my everything into my swing. Adrenaline surging through me, I didn't care about muscle or bone strain anymore; I just had to stand solid enough and put all my weight into the attack. It happened quickly and all at once. I was still standing, and so was she. Her expression wasn't cold, nor was it mocking. It was an expression of surprise.

One of my guards, like the head of a pickaxe, was hovering just on the opposite her face. Her neck was bent to the left, so that her face narrowly avoided it. I was pushing against her, and she was pushing against me. Her sword had caught on my guard, above my right hand, keeping it where it was and preventing it from driving any further into that very pretty face of hers. Where our swords met, the tip of hers and the flat edge near the guard of mine, her own sword's edge had slightly rolled. Sometimes something has to give, and when it comes to a cast iron sword, rife with impurities like hers and one made of space-age steel, mine was at an advantage. It hit that edge like a hammer and pounded it down. A grin returned to her face. The surrounding forest became even more illuminated; her tail erupted and burned brighter than ever. Embers were flicked to and fro as her tail whipped back and forth.

Her expression looked as if she was pleasantly surprised. She was getting an incredible amount of enjoyment out of being proven wrong. I still had a bit of fight left in me and another trick. We pushed against each other, and we reached the point where we were nearly pressed up against one another. It was the first time we had been this close since our fight began. It was now I realized I was looking slightly down at her, her eyes at my chin level. As I was looking down at her, she was looking back up at me with smile on her face. We were pushing against each others bodies more by this point. Neither showed any intent on relenting. My passion, my will to win and my anger all mingled together as my heart beat faster and faster. In parallel, her tail burned brighter and fiercer, embers creating little smoking patches of

grass around us.

Again, I could feel her putting more strength into her efforts, or maybe I was weakening. I was forced to take steps backwards. I could feel my own sword press against my chest and surely it would soon pierce the skin if I didn't try to back away. Our faces were right next to each other by now. Finally, I was forced up against a tree and had nowhere left to go. I felt a sharp pain and felt a liquid on my chest other than sweat. I was overtaken by a sudden instinct; I threw my head back and brought it back forward hard, slamming my forehead into her own with a deafening crack. At last she reacted. I wasn't quite sure what I had done myself, but the lizard-woman responded by twisting her sword at an odd angle. She hooked my sword by the cross guard and tossed it away along with her own.

I felt the steel cutting through the cloth so I hastily loosed my grip and let go to prevent my palms from being slit open. Both swords flew away and with a clang piled up in a heap some distance away. A hard fist slammed into my sternum and I doubled over, winded and trying to refill my lungs with air. She jumped back and looked at me bewildered. A stream of red then ran down her face and over her eye. Her lid closed in response, and she flinched. She ran her hand over her forehead. Her palm and three fingers were covered in a thin layer of her own blood. She looked up at me and reopened her other eye. She locked onto my own, those luminescent amber reptilian eyes. Her face showed only one thing.

Exhilaration

Like a bullet she rushed at me. I had regained my breath and tried to defend myself. I brought my arms up like a boxer to defend myself. One clawed hand wrapped around my left wrist and pulled it down to my side. I tried to swing my right fist, but her other hand seized my fist, and she clamped down on it hard. She held my hands down with her own, and she pressed her body against mine. She pushed forward, and I was forced back up against the tree, pinning me there. There she was, looking back up at me. It was a complicated expression on her face. I couldn't make heads or tails of it at first. She was breathing heavily, and her eyes were wet, and they glistened. I didn't have another moment to understand what was going on. Her face rushed untoward my own, and her lips pressed against mine.

It was warm. It was so very warm. My eyes shot open as far as they would go; they conveyed shock. I looked down at her, and hers were closed. She pulled her head back and looked up at me. My arms

were shaking, but she held them still. My legs were quivering, but she had slipped one of her thighs between my own and held me up. My lungs were trying desperately to get air, but her bare breasts pushed up against my chest, and her weight and strength held me back. There wasn't a trace of any expression I had seen before on her. She wasn't playfully smiling or looking at me with murderous intent. Her cheeks were flushed red, her lips were curled into a warm smile and her eyes were soft.

She turned her head to the side, and she pressed forward again. Her lips met with mine, and her body collided against my own. I gasped as air escaped me again, and this time something foreign forced its way inside. Something alive was inside my mouth, and it probed and pushed against my tongue. I felt a tickle of air from her nose against my face, and my own sense of smell was flooded. All I could smell was the scent of a campfire, the sweet burning scent of pine. My mouth tasted something slimy, wet and warm, a cascade of flesh and wetness that wasn't my own. Her saliva poured from her mouth to my own, and her kiss progressed deeper. Her tongue was wild, uncontrolled, like a savage beast. It pushed mine to the back of my mouth, and I wasn't able to breathe. Even through my nose I could hardly take in any air, and she did not relent. I found myself slowly starving of oxygen, and my body started to feel woozy. The strength in my arms faded fast. My fists unclenched, her own hands let go and seized them. She intertwined her fingers between my own and held on tight.

My legs lost their strength next, and my back slid down the tree toward the ground. She rode on top of me, straddled over my hips as she kept her mouth locked with mine. When I had finally hit the ground, she pulled back her face, a thick stream of saliva connecting us still. I was breathing hard, trying to catch my breath. She let go of my hands and brought her claws up to wrap around the back of my neck. For the third time, she brought her face in and inserted her tongue. I met it with my own, if only to attempt at stopping her from choking me again. They slipped and rubbed past each other. Pushing and brushing each other aside, mingling and dancing. Her breath became even hotter, and she moaned slightly this time. Her hips shook, and she rubbed her body up and down, her breasts pressing against me, her nipples tracing circles on my chest. Resting on her knees to each side of me she closed them tight to lock me in.

I wasn't starting to just feel her heat, I was starting to feel very hot myself. I was covered now in a new layer of sweat. It wasn't a cold sweat from life or death combat, but one that was warm. I was starting to feel turned on. This was the situation I was trying to avoid before. I

was conflicted; I was having lust forced onto me, forced onto me because I had lost. I was being overpowered and made to go along. Never had I done anything like this before. Yes, mock me if you must, a guy in his twenties, a dateless and kissless virgin in this day and age. Nothing in my life could have prepared me for this kind of passionate embrace. My first kiss had been stolen by some beautiful nonhuman woman I had never met in the middle of a forest on an alien world who was just less than a minute ago trying to kill me. I was scared, and the conflicting emotions made me feel ill deep down. At the same time, I couldn't deny that I was starting to feel hotter, and it was feeling better all the time.

I felt blood pumping toward my lower body. My jeans and underwear started to feel very tight, and my bulge started to push against the lizard-woman in a very embarrassing way. She didn't even seem to notice nor care; she continued to grind against me, pulling back to lick my neck and plant her lips in quick successive kisses everywhere she could reach. By the time I had raised my flag to full mast, pressed up against my clothing and her sitting on top of me, it began to hurt. It showed on my face, and she finally pulled back and noticed the change. Surely she must have become aware of it pressing against her.

Her expression was perplexed. She was inquisitive and pulled back her claws, placing them on the buckle of my belt. She quickly undid it and tossed it aside, but when she reached the button and zipper she stopped. Of course she'd be stumped, this world didn't appear modern, a zipper would be a foreign concept. She wasn't deterred, and she simply grabbed hold and tore my jeans apart with a quick and hard yank. I felt her palm and fingers run over the cotton fabric of my underwear, by now drenched by precum. She grabbed the elastic band and pulled it down, and my own little warrior was exposed, laying down across my pelvis fully engorged, and hard as it has ever been.

I watched her expression as she studied it. She ran her fingers along it, poked at it with a claw then wrapped her hand around it. I threw my head back instinctively at the sensation, and she noticed it. She tried squeezing it harder and letting go. Was she teasing me, or did she have no idea? Something finally dawned on her, and she gazed at me and I at her again. She held my penis between her thumb and finger and stood it up. Her other hand rested on my shoulder, and she raised her hips up into the air. Her face was full of lust, flushed even brighter a red than before.

Damn. 'She's really going to do it isn't she?' Was the thought that crossed my mind.

She dropped suddenly. My member was squeezed, hard, like it was being wrung through an old clothes dryer. I clenched my teeth and tried to bear with the pain. I noticed she was doing the exact same. When I looked down at last I saw her hips resting on me, a few thin trails of blood streaming down my legs.

Crap. She broke it, didn't she? Was the thought which came immediately. I began to wonder if I could ever bend it back to the right shape again.

The girl on top of me stirred and shook her hips from side to side and wailed in pain ever so slightly; each time she did it felt like another crank on the handle of what was wringing my penis flat. Finally, she stopped and calmed down, and so did I. I was breathing hard and so was she. She looked at me again with those crocodile eyes of hers. She wore a seductive and lust filled expression. A smile across her face that seemed genuine, ethereal and beautiful. For the first time in a while I noticed my heart skip a beat. I tried to say something, anything, but her hands returned to my cheeks, and she pulled me in forcefully for another kiss. Once again, I had to meet her head on or be choked out by how forceful she was. Whether she noticed or not, her hips were shaking back and forth. She lifted her body off the ground slightly with her knees and dropped back down.

The sensation around my dick was unreal. Completely surrounded by wet and soft walls, constricting and rubbing against my flesh and wringing it tight and roughly. Dancing before me and pressed against my chest, her massive bust tantalized me with their very existence. I still felt a sick pang of disgust in my stomach, some rogue part of my psyche informing me that I was being raped, but I felt a bestial side of me being released. It rose to match that of the woman sitting on top of me, and my hands reached out and grabbed hold of her buttocks. I dug my fingers in and tried to shake her hips even more. I opened my eyes again, and I saw her tail whip back and forth behind her.

Embers crackled like a campfire. She was like a forest fire. A living flame. There was not a single puff of black smoke, but her very presence choked me. Her presence was hot, and it seared my lungs, like the steam of a sauna that makes it hard to breathe. But like a pine tree on fire, that burning sap smelled ever so sweet and so did she. The pheromones and hormones must be getting to me... I expected

that inferno burning on hers to light up the entire area, but despite how hot it looked, not a thing erupted into flames. Only smouldering patches here and there lit by rogue embers. Her long hair, still slightly wet and disheveled danced around her head and hung down from it. A strong womanly smell radiated from it as it brushed past my nose as she rose up and down on top of me.

There was something I couldn't ignore, not even as I was being consumed by lust. It was me trying to figure out what had come over me. I had felt so cold before, but now I was burning hot. A part of my brain, buried deep in the back was still thinking rationally. It couldn't come up with any other conclusion on what was happening. This heat that was taking over was coming from her. It was taking over my senses; it was evaporating my reason. Eventually I had started to feel as warm as she felt to touch at first. Instead of two separate bodies, it felt like we had joined together and not in a superfluous way. It was a corruption, a foreign influence that was invading. It was trying to take me in, to get me hooked on it. Like a drug, an incense. That part of my brain tried to scream reason. It tried to call a stop to what was going on, but it was getting weaker and weaker, the voice getting quieter and quieter. Soon I could ignore it all together; it didn't go away, not completely, but it became far too meager. The sound of this girl's voice moaning so sweetly was all I could hear.

Her pace had picked up; and as broken and tired as my body was, it began to thrust upwards as well. Stroking me down below faster and harder. Her womanhood clenching tighter and more frequently. Her flawless, perfectly smooth and silky tanned skin rubbed up against me. She started riding me higher; her arms wrapped around my head bringing me in closer. Bouncing up and down in front of my face her breasts swayed. I lurched forward, and caught a nipple in my teeth and teased it. Her spine bent backwards, and her whole body twitched, and she let out a long sweet feminine sounding moan. Her hip gyrations picked up in pace. From that pleasure transferring back to me, my teeth clenched harder, and she reacted again. It was a snowball effect; it was building up to something larger and larger. I let go, she dropped back down and our faces met. This time we both pressed forward and locked lips and greedily and hungrily went at each other with our tongues. Her breaths became shorter, and her movements picked up in speed yet again.

I matched her movements. Her face pulled back and looked deep into my eyes. She then held me tight, tighter than she had before. Her head rested on my shoulder, and her teeth sunk down on my ear. I felt a familiar pressure building to a breaking point. It had

been building up slowly the whole time, I had nearly forgotten all about it. She had clamped down so hard; it felt as though not even a drop was allowed to pass through. That wasn't going to hold on much longer though; the dam was going to break. One last drop of her hips, that was all that was needed. She held onto me tight, pulling me in, and I pulled her into myself.

At that moment, I exploded. A river flowed from me into her. A throbbing in my nether regions, a convulsion, seized my loins and shook my whole body. I felt myself tense in her embrace, and I felt her tense in return. She let out one last sexual cry as she was unable to contain her ecstasy. The monster looked down at me with a euphoric expression on her face, and I felt captivated by its, dare I say, unrivaled beauty. Then her back arched like a bow before she fell back on top of me with all her weight. I fell to the side, my back coming to rest against the forest floor. She fell with me, coming to a gentle rest on top of me. Her soft and smooth tanned skin and voluptuous breasts pressing up against my chest. I hardly noticed the boney hardness of her red armored scales in the few places her perfect skin was not. I didn't have the strength to pull out or slink away. The two of us were connected; her womanhood refusing to surrender my manhood. Her claws were wrapped around my neck, and she exerted more strength than I could ever muster. She wasn't even near my weight, but her strength was inhuman, and it was foolish to even think of breaking free. She clung to me even though she seemed to be slowly drifting off to sleep in the warm afterglow of what we had just finished. Our bodies were still hot enough that I might say we were partially melted together. We were both breathing heavily as I looked up at the night sky above.

I noticed more and more starlight returning, the clearing around the spring becoming dimmer and dimmer. The girl resting on my chest, her breaths slowed and steadied, and they became shallow and rhythmic. The flames on her burning tails were becoming calmer. I was almost alarmed when the tail came to a rest on my leg; but even with it resting on top of my skin, it didn't burn; it didn't even hurt; it felt warmer than her body, but it was a pleasant warmth. It was like holding your cold hands near an electric heater in winter. My whole body felt like it was still warm, and as if I was under a warm blanket on a cold winter's night. I felt my eyelids begin to close until I couldn't keep them open any longer.

I drifted peacefully off to sleep.

Chapter 3

A serenade of song birds stirred me from my deep sleep and forced my eyes to open. I felt as though I did not even have a chance to dream, as quickly as I had fallen asleep last night my had eyes opened. I remember being sore all over, but that feeling seems to have all but vanished. Sitting up, for once, came with greatest of ease as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. I tried to stand up, but nearly fell over. My pants and underwear were wrapped around my legs. I thought that was a peculiar position to fall asleep in. I saw dew on the early morning grass, a slightly cloudy sky overhead; it looked like a cold mid-spring morning, so why wasn't I freezing? My eyes, scanning the clearing, eventually made their way to a soft rasping noise I heard beside me. Laying there, a naked woman, curled up, hugging a reptilian tail, her own tail, like a body pillow. A human woman, a young human woman, except for that tail, her forearms down, knees down and reptilian fins instead of human ears. All my memories of last night cascaded back to me at once upon seeing her. Overwhelmed I instinctively scurried backwards away from her. She groaned and stirred a little, but she didn't wake. My heart jump started at the sight but calmed back down. I was safe for now.

After putting a little distance between us, I suddenly felt a stabbing draft over my entire body. An early morning gust that was breezing in the canopy above slammed into my body like I had suddenly walked into a refrigerator. I pulled my underwear and pants up; my pants were torn at the front; the zipper having been forcefully torn apart and the button having flown off somewhere and sunk into the mud by now. I had to use one hand to hold it all up; the other I held over my body, rubbing myself to keep warm. My eyes quickly darted around; I saw where my belongings were, all kept in a backpack by the edge of a nearby spring. Beside it was a scabbard with a large sword on top of it, my own. That woman was still sleeping where she lay before, oblivious. I carefully retrieved my weapon from the pile and shook the morning dew off, just in case it should rust. I then turned toward her.

Attacking me unprovoked. Threatening my life. Almost killing me. Yet she relented, only to rape me and try to drive me insane. I still remembered that feeling; it was like I was falling backwards into a void. You wouldn't see how fast the ground was approaching and how long you had till you hit it; but like with all falls, you have to hit the ground eventually. The faster you fall, the harder you'll hit, the more likely you are to be broken and die. An experience that violated me, sapped me of my reason and put a spell on me. I was used, abused, taken

advantage of. Remembering now, with a clear head, filled me with anger. I gripped my hilt tighter.

I looked down at the sleeping woman now, completely defenseless. I started breathing heavier, short, heavy and rapid breaths. She turned over in her sleep, rolling to where I was resting before. Her body came to a stop face up in the patch of grass and dirt packed down where I had lain down exactly before. Her sleeping body seemed to be reaching out for something that wasn't there; her face twitching before she continued sleeping again. I was looked down at her now, at her face, sleeping peacefully there. I tried to look away, but I continued to stare at her; my heart beating fast. Tearing my gaze away I took a few breaths and looked back, but my heart beat fast again. My hands shook and started to sweat. I held one up to my face and tried to calm my breathing. I took a step backwards. Before I knew it, I had sheathed my sword. I continued to step backwards. I just couldn't do it. The part of me that had wanted to just end it there was blown completely away.

What are you thinking? A voice inside my head spoke to me. It was judgmental, dripping with venom in each word.

I had been consumed in a near murderous rage just a moment before, but I had caught myself. Just what was I thinking? Killing a defenseless person like that. Was it because it was such a despicable act? Did my conscience get the better of my want for revenge? How could I have ever been brought near the point of murdering someone? Especially in their sleep. Were there other reasons? Did it mean anything she was the most beautiful person I had ever laid my eyes on with a body I thought impossible and belonged to the realm of fantasies? Was I such a weak willed person that I was pliable and easy to manipulate with just the wiles and looks of a woman?

I didn't have any courage left to stand and have any of those questions answered. The stresses on my body over the last twenty-four hours seemed a far away memory from the stress that had finally taken its toll on my mind. I felt like I was nearing a breaking point. With all my belongings gathered, I simply turned and ran, not looking back. I ran, even when my legs started to burn again; I just continued on until I couldn't run anymore. I found a hidden spot, away in the bushes, and sat there, looking up to the sky above. Maybe if I sat there long enough, whatever sick and twisted powers that brought me here would get bored and send me home.

Eventually I came back to my senses, if only because my

stomach had started to churn and rumble. The reality of my food situation returned to me. I was also feeling completely parched. I rummaged through my bag, produced another crushed water bottle and gulped down the whole liter greedily. I sifted through the blankets and other gear, but that was it; I had no more bottled water nor a crumb of food. All that remained was the water in the forest, no doubt ridden with pathogens. If I didn't find civilization or a sign of it, today, I would start dying slowly real soon.

Driven by a new fear, I climbed the nearest embankment I could spot and reached the highest point, a tree with a near ground branch large enough to support my weight. Hanging my bag from a branch, I fished around inside until I found a small hard container; inside, still unbroken through some miracle, was a pair of binoculars. Now with seven times vision I surveyed the horizon, desperately searching for a smokestack or anything that would stand out and show some sort of settlement. I spent minutes up in the tree hoping something would catch my eye, but I found something that didn't make my situation any better. Crossing a clearing faraway, back where I had been trekking through only minutes before, was a very familiar form.

That lizard-woman, walking with her eyes glued to the ground, stopped to crouch and study the ground every so often. She seemed more presentable now. She was actually clothed, if you could call it clothes. Like the pig-women from before, it was more like a two piece swimming suit than any suit of armor. A bra woven with red scales, covering the fabric of the cups. Some armor covering her thighs, shoulders and arms was made, probably self-made, from what looked like her own molted scales. There was nothing more than what looked like a string bikini covering her pelvic region. As much of a sight as she was to behold, I shook my head and returned to studying where she was going, not what she was wearing.

I clicked my tongue, “Dammit. How did she- What is she doing?”

Holding a muddy finger up to her nose, she sniffed it; she then sniffed the air a few times and looked straight in my direction. My heart seized up in a panic.

I tried to calm it down, “There's no way she could have seen me just now. Calm down, just get down from the tree and-”

I lowered the binoculars and looked up at the sky. There was a break in the cloudy skies above; the sun shining in the sky directly

ahead. One thought, one word screamed inside my head, loud and clear.

Glare

I hastily shoved my binoculars back in their case, cramming them into the bag, and dropped down to the ground with a thud. I didn't stick a solid landing, but after picking myself up I broke out into a run. Crossing the forest again, fleeing on foot, nothing had changed since yesterday. My body wouldn't hold together getting this kind of surprise workout every day. I came upon a shallow creek and jumped in. The rocks were slippery, but I continued rushing down stream. Leave no foot prints, leave no scent. How was it that foxes tried to outsmart the hounds again? I turned on my heels and walked back up the creek against the current for a way and then jumped as far out as I could. Breaking out into a run once again, I climbed up wall of mud and, after reaching the top, hit the dirt and rolled into some bushes. I hastily removed my bag. My scabbard jutting and jabbing at me and getting caught in a bush, I took it off and searched for my binoculars. Breathing heavily all the while and trying to catch my breath.

I knew she was fast; if I couldn't shake her off my trail, I'd be better off trying to fight again rather than run. She was unstable, insane. She had gone from trying to kill me, to playful, back to trying to kill me to raping me. There's no way I was going to stick anywhere near someone like that. It was unthinkable, so I decided to hide and wait. Surveying the creek down below I had run through, a few minutes passed by, and sure enough she emerged walking beside the creek. I looked about and saw no sunlight shining down on me, I wasn't going to make that mistake again. Assured, I watched her with my heart beating quickly, almost out of my chest completely.

She crouched down and traced her hand over the soil like she was doing before. She followed a series of them until they reached the creek. Did she lose the trail there? I thought she might have, but she turned and shuffled slightly to the side. She traced her fingers over something else. I had to focus my binoculars, but I finally made it out, a bare footprint. She moved again, and I followed her; her face was full of concern. My mind began to put one and one together; but by the time a felt a shadow looming over me, it was too late. I felt a strong grip on my ankle.

Like a rag-doll I found myself being pulled faster than I thought my body could move along the forest floor backwards. I didn't even have a chance to scream or yelp in surprise. My hands spasmed, and I

dropped the binoculars. The ground grated against my bare chest. I flipped myself over only to have a massive pressure bear down on my chest. A foot connected to a muscular leg hit me straight in the diaphragm and knocked wind out of me completely. I tried to look up, but could only make out two silhouettes. One belonging to some very tall and broad human form and the second some sort of club. A club in motion as it blurred from the speed it was traveling which did not come a stop when it hit me hard across the right temple, and I was knocked out like a light.

Chapter 4

There are a number of situations one can wake up to that are absolutely terrifying. Which one is the most terrifying is open to debate. I would argue that the real answer is the most simple of all them; the most terrifying thing to wake up to is not being able to see with an unshakable sensation of claustrophobia. Complete sensory deprivation. Left alone with only my thoughts and not the good kind of thoughts either. These are the thoughts of a madman you have to share a lifeboat with while drifting in the middle of the ocean at midnight. I couldn't see a thing, the only smell was a stuffy stagnant air, my head was spinning, I was disorientated, my mouth tasted of dirt and my ears were ringing. I figured out quickly that I had a bag over my head, something like a hemp sack, because as my brain was coming back online that blackness was replaced by stars and spots dancing every which way until I could finally start seeing light shine through the weaving of this accursed bag over my head. Next, I noticed the ringing slowly dying out, replaced by voices that, at first, were being played back in slow motion to the point of being incomprehensible.

This progressed toward something I could understand, “-trophy you have found? Tauari?”

A second distinct voice behind me replied, “Yes Matron, I found it while I hunted in the forest.”

“Let us see it then.”

The cacophony of noises mixed with a piercing siren of my shell-shocked and rattled brain had subsided. As my mind came into clearer focus, I could tell these were female voices at the very least. A dull stabbing pain over my entire body was then drowned out by a stabbing sensation to my eyes. My eyes were suddenly flooded with light, and they slammed shut. Curiosity got the better of me, so I forced them open. I had to know where I was. Sitting cross-legged on a long elevated platform in front of me were five women. Five very tall women. I could tell even as they were sitting down. Not only were these women quite tall, they were also very muscular. Their appearances were a far cry from what I had seen so far over the last two days. They looked like female body builders, skin darkened and tanned by harsh sunlight, and woven together on their bodies were complex tribal tattoos. Wearing little else but loin-clothes and scraps of cloth over their chests, they did look the part of primitive tribeswomen. Their expressions were harsh, judgmental and disdainful. When I

looked at the one in the middle, her stoic expression turned into a furious frown. There was an impact on the back of my head, and my forehead slammed right into the dirt floor. I grit my teeth but managed to not let out a scream or a moan of pain.

A husky voice spitted out, “It's scrawny.”

A younger, but butch, retort from immediately behind me responded, “I am sure it is of noble stock.” It must belong to the one whose foot was pressing my forehead into the dirt. She continued, “Pale skin without boils, spots or scars.” Her foot was removed from my head, but a hand grabbed hold of the hair on the back of my head and lifted me up to my feet. “All its teeth; straight and white.” A hook, a finger from the taste of it grabbed me by the corner of my lip and pulled it open violently as if to show my teeth off behind them.

My hands reflectively reached back to where her hand had clasped like a vice on my hair. My knees were still weak, and they hardly had the strength yet to support my own weight which was being held up by her alone. This was something she did not take kindly to. With a snap of her wrist she pulled back harder and pushed me forward.

“Blue eyes, and its hair, brown, strong yet silky.” The girl's voice continued its appraisal of me.

My eyes were still stitched shut from trying to fight off the pain of being pulled around by my roots, but two powerful fingers pressed on my eyebrow and below my eye and pulled my left eye open. I found myself staring into that woman's face. It was defined by scars gained over many battles no doubt. They showed maturity, but yet again, like all the others I have laid eyes on so far, a face that belongs on a magazine, a fitness magazine this time, but I was seriously having to wonder where the hell I was that every woman from pig-woman to lizard-girl to Amazon was pretty to stunningly beautiful. Amazon. That word stuck out like a sore thumb the second after I thought of it. These tribeswomen, they fit the definition of an amazon perfectly. Gears in my head started turning, but before I could deduce anything of value, I was yanked back and thrown to the ground where I landed hard on my ass.

My eyes had adjusted enough by now that I was able to take in the rest of the scenery surrounding me. Besides this Matron before me, there were four other silent hulking women. They all looked related, same nose and other similar facial features. There was an

open skylight, letting midday sunlight blocked slightly by clouds in. I was in some kind of round tent, almost like a yurt. I was surprised I remembered what a yurt was at a time like this.

The amazon in the middle spoke once more, “Tauari. Again and again you have defied my offers, and what you bring back for yourself is this?”

My captor's outburst was passionate, “I will not take charity Matron. You may be my Aunt, but I will not have my pride be spoiled by having my husband given to me.”

Wait. What was that last bit she said?

“I have found one, not some peasant or dirt farmer with a fat pigs nose, not some pudgy baker's son or wet trousers town guard. I have hunted for and caught the son of a noble.”

It was true I grew up in a middle class family. Regular health and dental care, an orthodontist, I didn't toil in any field, I just stayed inside and studied. I guess suburbia lifestyle in the twenty-first century Earth would at the very least be equal to the kind of preferential luxury an elite would have here. I was also strangely pleased that she had mentioned farmers, bakers and soldiers, that meant there had to be civilization, human civilization, somewhere out there. It was the best news I had heard in the past two days. Those captive men from before weren't just some gang of men abducted by roving bands of Ape-men on horseback armed with Soviet surplus. I was so desperate for just a little good news, it almost didn't seem so bad that I had been taken prisoner to hear it.

It was then I actually remembered that I had been taken prisoner. I got up to me knees for the first time since waking and turned my head to finally get a look at this captor of mine. She had fair colored hair, a dirty white with a tint of regal purple. Her skin was a dark tan, her features were soft along with her curves that were feminine, yet her body was that of a weight lifter, slightly noticeable six-pack abs along with overt leg and arm muscles. She was also young; she didn't have the same scars that the other older woman had; her immaturity showed on her face. The clincher, though, was that the sides of her head were crowned with large pointed elvish like ears. They stuck out horizontally a good ten centimeters from her head. I was certainly once again not dealing with human beings. To see all of this though, I had to look up; she had at least twenty centimeters on my own height. She had to be over two meters tall. If I had learned anything so far from running into so many strange women again and

again; my situation had gotten much worse.

She finally took notice that I righted myself. A harsh kick to the ribs was my punishment for having the audacity to want to get off the ground. I fell over sideways with a crash. I tried to scoot backwards, getting onto my hands and feet hoping to break out into a run. She quickly grabbed onto my ankle again and with the great of ease lifted me off the ground. I was hanging a good thirty centimeters off the dirt floor, suspended by my leg. She was only hanging onto me by one hand. She did not even look the least bit troubled by this exercise. This was the first time I had experienced true powerlessness.

I heard a crack next, and then I felt that crack. I felt my stomach churn, and the blood just started to rush from my feet, to my head and then onto the dirt floor. I think she had just slammed my head onto the ground, and I felt a surge of disgust and hatred well up inside. She had already demonstrated her position of power over me, but she still took it upon herself to inflict harm. Thankfully she didn't do it a second time, rather she let go, and I fell into a heap on the floor. I coughed out a mouthful of dirt after impact. That feeling of anger didn't go away. I felt it wash over me, but it soon passed like a wave, and I felt a peculiar clarity. My heart felt at ease, I knew what I had to do now. I had been through so much, for it to mean something; I couldn't just give up here. I didn't want to give up, but I had no way to fight; I had no way to run. Scoring a victory for myself seemed impossible. Perhaps I could just make them suffer a defeat, so I closed my eyes and rested my chin on the ground I stuck my tongue out far beyond my front teeth and closed my eyes.

“Stop!” She bellowed; short, simple and clear as day.

I opened my eyes once again and saw the Matron, her legs uncrossed, one foot on the ground ready to spring up. She was staring dead on at who I assumed was the amazon, Tauari, just behind me. I watched her sit back down and then stare long and hard at me. It was the first time she looked at me without a disdainful look or an appraising eye. The expression on her face was still furious, and she didn't say another word.

“Matron-”

“Tauari. I will allow you to have your prize. You have defied me for many moons, but now you two will be wed, and that shall be my final decision. You should know that you have chosen one a troublesome one.”

“What-”

“Not a fair fighter. Not with strength. This one is sly like a fox. As wicked as a weasel. Its leg caught in a trap; it would sooner chew off its own leg. You would do well to show it the pack leader is you, or you will have to learn a harsher lesson.” The matron snapped her fingers, and two imposing figures entered.

I turned my head to look, but I was only met with a foot suspended in the air, a foot crashing down on top of my head. I can't recall how many times this has happened in the past few minutes, but this one stunned me, and the world spun round and round.

“It was ready to have its own tongue cut off and bleed rather than be captured.” She commanded the two brutes swiftly, “Take it away. Tie it up and gag it. Hold it with the others. Keep it separate and safe from them. It will do anything, even use others to escape in life or death if it can.”

Tauari tried to get another word in edgewise, “Matron-”

“You will take part in the ceremony with all the others. You will also go last. That is all I have to say to you. Now leave and prepare for tonight.”

I wasn't given a chance to do or say anything myself, although there was fat chance of that happening even if I had that chance. Before I was held against the ground, and rope tied my wrists and ankles together, a cloth rag was wrapped around my head and between my teeth to gag me as well. A hemp sack was once more placed over my head, and it was tied around my neck to keep it there. I felt like I had been tied up in such a way that it wouldn't be so far-fetched if I was tossed on railway tracks. Between two hulking amazons, I was lifted up and carried out. It felt cold outside; it was very noticeable given how stuffy that tent felt. I was getting the impression that the nice weather this place was having would come a stop soon enough.

There was a hustle and bustle of hammers on steel, fighting and sparing. All of it the usual din you might expect from some type of war camp. I had my doubts this place was a permanent residence of these amazons. It seemed more like a staging area. I wished I could see what was going on to have more food for thought on my conjectures, anything to distract myself, but I was hastily moved into another tent. From outside I could hear voices within, but they fell

completely silent once I felt the tent flaps brush past. I was moved quite deep inside before being tossed onto the ground. Afterwards, I was forced to stand up against a pole, and yet another rope tied me tightly to the pole by my neck. I heard a clatter of wood on wood, some heavy bare footsteps march away, the tent flaps fluttering again in the distance and then nothing for quite some time.

After what felt like three or five minutes, I finally heard another voice; it was a masculine voice; it had to belong to a man; an actual man who was imploring me, “Hey. Hey? You awake there?”

I couldn't speak, the best I could do was mumble, but I instead rose my head and looked in the direction the voice had come from. This seemed to be a good enough signal, and another voice, also belonging to a man, spoke up, “Why did they throw em and lock em in the cage?”

“Because they don't want any of us touching him, that's why.” This third voice belonged to a gruffer, older sounding man. It was dripping with ill intent, “Some high price fresh meat they don't want kicked around in here. I bet someone in the head family got their hands on him. The lucky bastard.”

I heard the wooden cage rattle, as if someone had put their weight on it; I could almost imagine this grizzly middle age man hanging onto the bars looking at me.

“Speak up then boy! Why dontcha tell us a story then?”

“She abuse ya before she used ya?”

“He still got pants on. I don't think they touched him yet.”

“I ain't ever see blue pants like them before.”

“You got a name there son?”

Voice after voice seemed to crowd around, I could hear footsteps and the presence of several men gather around the cage I was in. Their voices were outside of arm's reach, if only by a bit, but I could almost smell their putrid breath from here, through the bag.

“You gonna ignore us you little sack of shit?” This last voice felt agitated, and the cage shook for a few seconds before what I guessed was someone pulling him away.

That gruff voice spoke up again, I figured he was some sort of pack leader, “I'm sure they gagged em.” The crowd surrounding him murmured for a bit before he continued, turning around to speak to them, “What we have here, is a rebel. Probably got on some mistress’s sour side and caused some trouble.” He paused for a second, and I could hear him turning around to face me again, “Nah, he looks too scrawny for that. You even work at all son? You're too thin to be just some farm hand. Too pale to be an honest to God working man... Nah, I bet you're some kind of rich merchant's bed stain. Some stick up the ass Baron's spoiled little brat. Am I right? No. Don't answer, you probably can't talk anyways.” His voice grew very low and serious, “You try ta kill yourself boy? You try to get out of here? Well that ain't gonna happen. You're an Amazon's slave now-”

The man was interrupted by some hushed whispers into his ears. Imparting some knowledge to him before he continued his belittlement and intimidation of me.

“Oh ho, so that little princess, finally decided she found something to suit her fancy? Well, lucky you then, at least you'll get some quality table scraps.” He turned and walked away from my cell and spoke as though he was addressing a crowd. “Well, here's the deal, boys. We're all 'husbands' of amazons now. Me and some of my buddies here are to keep new bloods like you in line. Until the ritual that is. After that, you won't want to leave.”

Finally, I heard before me, several voices murmur worriedly amongst themselves, perhaps dozens. The tent felt all the more crowded and constrained now that I knew they were there.

A shaky voice rose up amongst them, “I've got a family! A wife and a little girl-” A thud and a grunt silenced the man; a weight hit the ground, and the worried whispers turned to terror all around.

“Out there. Out in the camp and back in the jungles, you're theirs, but in here you belong to me. I'm king in here. If your wife and daughter were brought here too, they'll make em one of them. You'll see your wife again soon enough at the ritual. She'll be quite different when you see her though.” The man's voice took a sudden darker turn, a malicious tone that sent chills down my own spin, a face no doubt with a twisted smile, imaging it scared me, “A brand new woman, but she won't be making bracelets out of flowers anymore. You'll see.”

I was trying to keep a straight face under the bag. The whole time he kept talking; I was trying to ignore him, but I'd at least admit to

myself that it was getting to me. Every second it felt like control over my situation was slowly drifting away from me. That sea I was stranded in; there were two voices talking to me now, the crazy man and now one grounded in reality trying to set it straight how things were going to be. I couldn't keep hold it in any longer; I felt tears start streaming down my face, waterworks flooding and the pipes having burst. My breathing became hoarse, and I started choking while I trying to stifle my wails. I tried to hide it, but I couldn't pretend to be unfazed. It was too obvious, so obvious that it didn't take long for the whole crowd gathered around me to break out into rancorous laughter. Many insults were thrown, but they had all blended together into a mess of sound; I wasn't able to separate them from each other.

“Marriage ceremony tonight.”, that gruff man's voice shouted out. “Tonight, fresh meat, is the night that the wonderful little lady who brought you here is going to tie the knot with you. There won't be any church bells. Oh no. You'll be getting some of these marking of your own like you see on me, oh, and one of these.” There were gasps throughout the tent, a little laughter from his goons. “That's right, branding, her own little stamp she'll put on you to show that you're hers. So that you don't get beat too hard or used by any other mistress unless she wants it that way. You know, if she's a little kinky like that. And you, the little momma's boy, the cry baby in the cage, I hear the higher up you go, the bigger the brand it'll be!”

It appeared as though they wanted to make me some sort of whipping boy. Some sort of other, a privileged outcast who they could beat on and treat differently. It wasn't any sort of situation that anyone, not even a masochist who might have pitched his own tent at the thought of that kind of abuse and slave play, would like to hear. I hadn't had a drink or a bite to eat all day; I was completely sapped. My hands clasped around one last shred of light fluttering behind the dark thoughts running amok in my head. Somewhere deep down trying to keep some shred of hope. I still was refusing to fully accept my plight, maybe I had become so delusional that I was no longer sane. Maybe now I was the madman in the boat trying to drown out the sane one who could think rationally and accept reality.

Time began to flow oddly after that; it didn't help to make the case that I was sane; what could be hours passed since I had been tied here. I could hear the sounds of crying and fighting; I could hear that man and his goons browbeat, intimidate and abuse the other men in the tent into compliance and obedience. Sunlight from above, what shone through the sack over my head, died slowly, being replaced with dusk and then night. My life felt like I was viewing it through time

elapsed footage. A few memories and stimuli registering in my brain to make it appear as though time had sped up around me.

The flaps of the tent had fluttered again, and after that no man inside dared make a noise. As a march of feet made their way inside, like herded sheep, the captives inside all escaped to the back, by my cage, and crowded around. What little space I had been granted to myself was once again pressed in on, and I was feeling claustrophobic. A series of noises followed soon after; the sound of things being removed from the dirt. A flutter of cloth was heard, and a gust of fresh air washed over my body. I would wager that the entire tent had been pulled down. With little warning after that, the sound of drums, hooting and hollering from many women in some primitive tribal choir washed over the calm and sombre mood.

The noise was incredible, but I still had one more thing said to me, by that man, “I can't wait to see yours. I hope they save the best for last.”

After that, the presence was gone, I heard the cage surrounding me be torn down, but rough hands added even more rope to tie me to this pole holding me down to the spot. The bag over my head hadn't been pulled off. I'm not sure when they ever would, probably when it was near my turn. I could hear the pounding of a hammer on steel, and a hiss of hot iron in water, no doubt hammering out the brands on the spot for the ceremony. It seemed the first one was finished, and soon after the entire camp echoed with the screams of a man in agony; I could smell the burnt flesh shortly after, and the hammer on steel began again with the choir cheering, hooting and hollering the whole time.

My sense of sight had all but nearly decided to give up by this point, and my hearing had taken over the best it could. It meant I was privileged to the chaos of noise around me, but it also allowed me to sense something approaching me from behind. My heart sunk when I thought that maybe my time had finally come, but the footsteps were light, different from before. I heard a twang of steel and a presence get closer and closer until I could hear still and shallow breaths just behind me. My own breathing picked up, as I began to feel panicked and confused. I felt a pressure against my neck, the sound of cutting rope and a soft noise as I felt some rope unravel around my neck and fall to the ground beneath me. In an instant, I felt a sudden rush as my vision at long last had been returned, the dull brown landscape highlighted by near pitch blackness being banished at last.

The light of many fires illuminating the area stung me at first, but it was night, and my eyes were still mostly adjusted. All the other men in the tent were frozen in terror before me, beyond that a semicircle of amazons formed an audience of sorts watching some bizarre ritual take place on a small wooden platform elevated half a meter off the ground before them. A team of two amazons waded into the crowd; the men around them trying to scoot away, trying not to get in their way. The weaker ones were pushed forward, but they didn't grab the first one they could; they forced their way into the crowd and picked one at random. They held him down, stripped off all his clothes and carried him off to the platform

There the two women held him down. One other standing behind him, waiting. The hammer stopped, a hiss of steam and something was brought up to the stage. A brand, at least that is what I guessed. It was handed to the amazon and a chorus of cheers erupted. It all just as suddenly went silent. When the glowing iron was brought closer the only sound in the entire camp came from the never ending drum beat. That amazon then looked at the exposed back of the man being held down. She came to some decision and then stuck it down and held it on the man's middle back, and he cried out in pain, those shouts were just as soon drowned out by the audience cheering out loud. After finishing, some salve was applied to his back. He was then force fed some clear white liquid in a large wooden saucer, likely some sort of alcohol. His screaming and shouting subsided as he looked to become inebriated immediately. Likely drugged to high hell as well. The hulking amazon proceeded to abuse the man, sexually. It looked like the honeymoon would start early, immediately actually. Offstage was a growing orgy, as though those newly 'wedded' Amazons were showing off.

The bizarre and horrific scene before me had grabbed my attention, but I soon remembered the presence behind me. I could hardly move my head; I could only turn it to my side, slowly and painfully, the post rubbing hard against the back of my head as I did. As I turned I was met with a face looking up at me. Amber crocodile eyes lit and luminescent under the moonlight and the bonfires. My eyes focused, and I saw they were accompanied by a familiar face, the woman from last night, the same one from this morning.

I was greeted by a tomboyish soprano, “Hello~? You awake?”

She leaned her head from side to side and moved her face in closer, right in front of mine. I instinctively tried to back away, but I had

nowhere to back up to. She stood on her toes, if you could call them that, so that her eyes where on level with my own. Her eyes, right in front of mine now, stared deep into my eyes. She was so close that I couldn't see anything else. Then just as quickly, she pulled back and gave another wide toothy smile.

With a smile that was bright as day, she delightedly said, “Good. You're awake. Are you alright?” She put a claw on her hip and shifted her weight when I didn't say anything, and that smile turned into an impatient frown, “I said hello.”

She finally noticed the piece of cloth wrapped around my head, filling my mouth, and sighed. A dagger was protruding from her clenched fists, and she brought it up toward my face lightning fast. I flinched and closed my eyes, but I heard the unmistakable rip of cloth and felt a brush of scale across my cheek as the cloth was pulled out from my mouth. I heaved, coughed and took some very deep breaths of air; I hadn't had any fresh air since this morning, and it felt great. There wasn't a single cut on my cheek either. I could have sworn she had cut so close that she should have nicked me, but she had perfect control of her blade despite the whimsical way she carried herself.

She was waiting patiently, so I chose my words carefully, only a little louder than a whisper, “What the hell are you doing here?” I noticed that despite having tried to chose my words carefully, my emotions got the better of me.

If she took any offense, it certainly didn't show on her face. With a proud little smile on her face she calmly and matter-of-factually replied, “I am here to rescue you of course.”

It was the best news I had heard in a long time, but I had to ask, “Why?”

“Because you're my husband of course.”

I regretted asking immediately.

Chapter 5

Tumbling between those reptilian-like fingers of hers was a dagger twirling effortlessly like a pen in a bored student's hand; she was looking at me as if she was expecting me to say something. She still had that smile on her face, but I was caught between a rock and a hard place. The same girl who had almost killed me, hurt my pride, raped me, then tried to hunt me down was now standing before me so cocksure and confident without a care in the world. I looked ahead; no one had noticed her somehow; everyone was too terrified and engrossed in the scene before us. Behind her, a tear right in the fabric of what was left standing of the tent. She didn't seem to even care that someone might notice her. I wouldn't be too surprised; her tail was whipping back and forth like a happy dog flicking embers here and there; I was less worried about her starting a fire and more that she was as noticeable as a torch at night like this. When I thought about it though, it wasn't nearly as bright as any of the bonfires.

I was lost in thought again, but she cleared her throat which brought me back from my train of thought, which led to me blurting out, “What?”

Real smooth there buddy.

She didn't seem very daunted. Instead she took a step behind me, and a second later I heard a sawing sound then a snap of another rope. A rung of rope tying me to this pole dropped to the ground around my feet with a thud. With her still behind me, the pair of amazons grabbed a random prisoner and dragged him off again. Thankfully my being in the very back meant they hadn't discovered I had been debagged and ungagged. She then circled around again and showed her dagger and another smile.

“I said you're my husband.”

“What? When did that happen?” I was starting to lose my cool.

This question took her aback a bit, and she looked genuinely confused; she turned her head to the side again. I had been distracted by her for so long I didn't notice the ceremony going on in front of us, and once more there was an ear piercing screech from another prisoner having his flesh seared well done. It was then that I remembered my predicament, and I turned back to her. I tried to hide a scared look of apprehension and the impatient air around me

She had already taken an abrupt change in attitude when I turned back to her. She was almost pouting, “Last night. Under the moonlight.”

“You raped me.”

“It was so romantic.” I don't think she was paying attention to me. She even had the nerve to say that puffing her chest out a little.

The second time I wouldn't be ignored, “You raped-!”

A soft pressure pressed on my lips and shut me up; she had her index finger, claw, whatever you'd call it pursing my lips together to shush me up. She looked over her shoulder, and so did I. Not a stir or glance in our direction. With all the noise going on elsewhere, I guess the far corner over here was hardly noticeable. I was a little out of line to start yelling, but she definitely was hearing me.

She looked me right in the eyes, but all she had to say was, “No. I didn't.”

I was dumbfounded by her nonchalant dismissal, as I regained my calm and lowered my voice once more, “No? Well you did. What else would you-”

“You came, so it was making love.”

My wits fried with that one. We weren't on the same page; we hadn't even read the same book. I didn't know how to respond to that or where to begin. There were a million things wrong with that statement, but the sound of drums, hammering, screaming and wails and moans of ecstasy brought me back. If I ignored everything else she said, she still said that she was here to rescue me. That was a good start. I could worry about other things at some other time.

She was still pouting, maybe pretending to; I didn't know, but she didn't flinch at all from my vitriol before. Instead she calmly explained, “You don't want to be rescued?”

I seized upon my chance, “Yes, I-”

I was quickly cutoff; she pounded an open palm with her other fist as though she had some to some revelation, “Of course, how silly of me. I still have a lot of things to learn about being a wife.” She then pointed one extended claw at me, “Your pride.”

I was once again lost, “What?”

Although I was sure she wasn't paying attention anymore, so I was naive to think my being confused would get her to stop her train of thought. Did she also just say wife?

“To accept someone's help for nothing, no man, no, no warrior would want such charity.” I was beginning to notice she liked to emote and exaggerate her words with theatrical body language, “In exchange for me rescuing you, I will charge a fee.”

Me and my big fat mouth. The situation was getting worse and worse. I didn't have anything of value on me. My lost belongings weren't much either if I still had them. I had no money, not that any of it would be legal tender wherever this accursed world was. I was going to explain all this before I was interrupted again.

“I won’t charge my regular fee. I don't want money. Our money. We have more than enough.” She went deep into thought for a moment before continuing with a spark of revelation, “Three questions.”

“Please wait a-”

Her face was suddenly very serious, and it forced me to stop in my tracks as she held up the three claws on her right hand, “I want you to answer three questions honestly. Information is very valuable right?”

I had resigned at this point, “Yes sure, that sounds fair. Wonderful, couldn't think of a better solution.”

If I continued to argue, I'd only have to spend longer here. They could take me away at any time. At any time, they could see her. She acted so brazenly as though it hadn't even occurred to her that she could be found out. Maybe she did but felt she was on top of things; either way, it was making my heart skip beats.

Resting one of her claws on her collarbone and looking up at me she immediately asked something I wasn't prepared for, “Do you think I'm beautiful?”

I did a double take, “What?”

What kind of question is that? I thought. Does she have some kind of serious self esteem issues where she needs compliments at the most inappropriate of times? I squirmed under the ropes uneasily as I tried to make sense of the situation, but I eventually looked back to

her. I looked her body over from bottom to top, top to bottom and once again. When I returned to look her in the eyes I noticed she was blushing, and that caused me to do the same. I closed my eyes tight, but took a deep breath and opened them again to see her still staring at me in embarrassed anticipation.

I looked away unable to hide my embarrassment. “Yes,” There I said it.

Even though I wasn't looking, I could hear a crackle, as if her flame had suddenly flared up for just an instant, like a log of wood splitting and popping. “Really? How beautiful?” Her voice was asking softly for confirmation.

“Yes. Without a doubt. Alright? Happy? No?” The words were gushing from my mouth now, but I didn't stop. “You have the most beautiful face, the most well curved and built sexy body I've laid my eyes on in my life. That means something where I come from you know? Pretty girls get their picture everywhere, and you top them all. Wait were those the other two ques-”

When I looked back she had disappeared again I heard another snap of rope and another bundle of it fall to the ground at my feet. At the same time, another man was dragged away. When the amazons left she slowly came back into my field of vision again, a wry smile on her face. I was feeling flushed looking at it.

She deliberately and with great strength put a hand, claw, whatever she'd call it on my shoulder and asked her next question, “Why would you run away from such a pretty girl then?”

“Because you tried to kill me. Then you raped me. I've already gone over this.”

“At first.”

“Huh?”

“At first I tried to kill you.”

I was finally getting her to admit to it, “So you admit it?”

“You snuck up on me while I was bathing, armed, with a weird look in your eye. You were also drooling.”

“I was not drooling.”

“Yes, you were. A perverted assassin. I had to protect my maidenhood.”

I was desperately trying not to yell so I whispered wrathfully through clenched teeth, “Assassinate? I still don't even know who you are. I'm the victim here. Don't try to turn this around and blame me.”

“I am the victim here.”

“Bullshit.”

“You attacked me back.”

“That's called 'defending yourself'.”

“Not that kind of attack. You attacked me with cupid's arrow.” She cradled her cheeks in her palms and writhed on the spot like a swooning school-girl.

I didn't have anything to say to that. My anger had been building up during that exchange, but she had struck that with a pin and deflated it in an instant. All that rage in turn, with nowhere to go, fried my brain, and I stood there, tied up, unable to say a thing. She ignored me, moved back behind me and cut another bundle of rope. I felt less connected to this accursed pole by the minute; it was a good feeling, one that I can not understate. Even though my wrists and ankles were still tied together in front of me, and my whole body was wrapped in rope which was then roped to the pole, I could wriggle back and forth a bit to get my circulation going again. Once again, some poor soul was dragged off to the stage; and with perfect timing, she maneuvered back into my sight. This time she came around from the left and didn't stop at my side. She came around completely to face me dead on, and she looked up at me, right in the eyes.

“Last question.”

My fried brain jump started back to life with panic, “What are you doing? They're going to see you.”

She hesitated before asking, she took a few deep breathes and finally said it, “I love you.”

That wasn't a question. When what she said finally got through my head, and I noticed it wasn't a question but a statement, it hit me like a ton of bricks. My body shook, and my heartbeat jumped the rails and twisted into a train wreck. What was I? Thirteen again? Her eyes

were too serious; I couldn't look directly at them, but when I tried to look away, her claws, her palms caught each side of my face and forced me to look at her.

While I shook there panicked and overwhelmed she continued with her actual question, “Do you love me?”

I thought for a moment that she had stuck that dagger into my heart because that question hit me hard. My cheeks flushed a deep red, and I felt my mouth gape open. I was stuttering and unable to get a single word out. I took a few deep breaths and calmed down. Her face was serious. Dead serious. She was prepared to hang onto my every word. She had this unmistakable devil may care cocky attitude this whole time; I wasn't stupid and could feel she was teasing me up until now, but I couldn't ignore how sincere her expression was now. I almost blurted something out; but from how she was looking at me, the words got caught in my throat, and I had to swallow them down and rethink them. I meditated on my thoughts, no, perhaps the proper word her would be feelings. I was supposed to be honest, so I will be.

“No.”

Her eyes shot open with shock and cast downward. It felt as though her claws would drop from my cheeks soon, and I almost panicked at her visceral reaction so I had to hurriedly continue,

“No, I wont answer that here. I'm tied to a pole. I'm about to be taken away, stepped on and have a red hot iron slapped on me and drugged. Then I'm going to be beaten. Raped. Brutalized and enslaved. Then I'm going to be taken away where the other slaves will beat me every chance they get and treat me like shit. The other women here will do the same. I'll probably spend the rest of my life, if my spirit isn't broken soon, trying to find a way to kill myself. So no. I won't say I do. Because I honestly don't. It wouldn't be fair. I would say anything you would want to hear to get out of here. But to say I like some stranger I met yesterday who tried to kill me when she laid eyes on me and then changed her mind to ra- have sex with me. No. I won't say it. If you're serious, you don't deserve that. I don't. I don't even know your name”

“Rosette. That's my name.”

She interrupted me when I wasn't finished, but I stopped and had to ask, “Excuse me?”

“My name is Rosette. They call me the Thorn Knight, and

you can call me Rose." She was wiping tears from her eyes now with a large reptilian finger. "No. I'm happy." She sniffed and looked back at me. "I'm happy, that you're such a kind and thoughtful person."

I thought I had fucked up. Fucked everything up real good. All you had to do was say 'yes' you idiot. What do you owe her? Do you actually owe her a truthful answer like that? If you had just gone along with it, she would have cut you loose. Now she's just going to leave, and in a few moments, you'll start the new beginning of your terrible life. Smart move. Real smart move there.

While I was regretting my life choices, I heard another snap of rope, and a final bundle of rope fell to the ground. I didn't expect it; and being without food and water since being caught, I had no strength at all. Being tied up like I would be at home thrown on some railway tracks didn't help either. That said, I fell forward. Not onto the ground this time, I fell right onto someone, and my face right into someone's bosom. From there I felt myself spin around, my feet lifted off the ground and a pair of arms wrap around my head. A gleeful giggle ringed in my ears. I was pulled back upright, and she looked me right in the eyes before embracing and hugging me; she was incredibly strong, but it felt very tight and intimate instead of crushing me.

"Come on. Let's go, husband." Rose... No. Rosette said with a light and chipper voice.

I then noticed that, although I had been cut free from the pole, my wrists, ankles and in fact my entire body was still tied up, still ready to be thrown on a railroad somewhere.

I didn't think I had much room to protest, but I did anyways, "Why don't you just cut me loose? I can run, just give me a minute."

The response from her was immediate, "No. I've always wanted to do something like this."

"Do something like what?" She didn't respond so I had to ask again, "Do something like what?" Still no answer, we hadn't even started moving yet. "...Rosette?"

She shuddered when I called out her name. I wasn't sure if it brought her back to reality; or given the way she's been acting, it merely gave her rush of exhilaration.

"Rosette?... You there?"

“They've spotted us.”

That wasn't what I wanted to hear, “Who? They? A couple?”

The music and festivities came to a complete halt. The drums ceased to beat; the hammer on iron stopped. Not a sound could be heard from where the festivities had been in full swing just a moment ago. There was only Rosette and I's breathing, a bonfire crackling, wisps of Rosette's tail fire flickering back and forth and a breeze.

Rosette answered my question very dryly, “No. All of them now.”

I tried to be calm and firm, “Rosette. Cut me loose.”

“No. I've always wanted to do something like this.”

“Do wha- Whoa!” Rosette scooped me up in her arms, one arm behind my shoulders, the other hoisting me up behind my knees. This was no doubt a princess carry, and it was incredibly emasculating. “Rosette! Untie me. I can run just fine.”

“No time!” Rosette had formally declined my protests. She lashed out with her talon feet, an axe kick straight up that sliced through the side of the tent, and she jumped through the opening. Her tail brushed up against the sides of the tear, and it was subsequently lit on fire.

Horns, yelling, screaming and pandemonium took over through the camp. I craned my head to look backwards to see a massive stampede of men desperately attempting to flee an ever growing inferno that was growing out of control. It was as if a prison riot had erupted. Those who had yet to be dragged off were trying to flee in every direction being run down and recaptured by their amazonian pursuers. Except Rosette, she kept running surefooted onwards, even when she was carrying me. She twisted and turned through the tents with ease. Did she know what she was doing? Her path felt deliberate, preplanned. Most of the camp was already deserted, everyone had gathered for the ritual, but Rosette suddenly took a sudden turn after running so far in one direction toward the edge of the camp.

I screamed out, “It was just a little further. I can see the edge of camp from here!”

“They'll catch us eventually if we go that way.” She turned ninety degrees and returned to a full sprint. We'd be running back,

brushing just past the edge of that large audience before if she kept running. “I know what I'm doing. I'll rescue you; don't worry husband!”

Sprint is perhaps not the appropriate word to use. She was giving an Olympian runner a run for their money while carrying about 70 kilograms. I turned my head to look behind us, and arrayed there was a line about twenty meters away of about eight amazons, armed and ready. I suppose Rosette showed me up on that one; but before the sting could set in, I saw they were also armed, blow darts in hand.

I shouted out a warning, “Blow darts a six o'clock!”

Rosette's response was rather confused “A six what?” Thinking about it, that one shouldn't have surprised me.

“Just dodge!”

Barreling to our right, Rosette's shoulder checked a nearby tent wall and tore through it; the darts whizzing down the path we were just on. Inside the tent itself was a group of men, a couple playing dice, another four of them cooking. They all stopped and looked at the two of us completely surprised.

A large burly man sitting on the floor with dice that just fell from his hand could only muster a few bumbling words, “What in the hell?”

I recognized the voice immediately; it was the voice that belonged to the man intimidating all the others earlier today in the tent. Although Rosette paid them no mind, at least no more than air, once she caught sight of the entrance and dashed away.

I turned my head to keep looking him dead in the eye to give him my parting thoughts, “See you later, fucker!”

Both of us disappeared back into the camp before any of them could get a word in or do anything.

Rosette took only a few seconds to get her bearings before taking off again, homing in on some other side of the camp. The further we ran, the louder the riot and chaos around the stage became. Eventually we found ourselves at a T junction in the camp layout and enraged battle ready amazons to the left and right. Surely we were still under hot pursuit from behind, but this didn't stop Rosette who simply barreled on ahead. With a jump, she kicked off various boxes and wooden cages of supplies and live animals; each squawking and

freaking out. With all the weight she was carrying, it didn't make sense to me how she managed to also run and leap across the taut cloth roofs of the tents.

When I looked back, I saw a trail of destruction. A line of fire drawn over her footsteps, quickly burning out of control and enveloping the whole camp. A whirlwind of javelins, thrown axes, darts and arrows flew and crisscrossed around us as the entire war band of women tried to converge in on us. Rosette's face... It was certainly not like my own. Mine was stricken with fear and terror. Her's... Well... Her face could only be read one way: she was thrilled, an ear to ear smile on her face. A cocky expression that dared the whole world to take her on. If I had known her for longer than just yesterday, I could claim that she might just be having the most fun she's had in her whole life.

After crossing the camp and leaping down from the stacked boxes and tent roofs, we were running alongside a cliff edge. It was dark, and I was not in any position to see over the edge, but I could see well enough ahead that a palisade wall surrounding the other three sides of this camp was ahead and behind us.

I had a dreadful thought, I didn't want to entertain it, but I had to ask, “You're not thinking of-”

“It's perfectly safe.”

I thought as much. I've had enough of leaping and falling from high places recently, and it showed in my panicked voice, “No no no.” I noticed the sound of flowing water now, “From this high up, hitting the water would be like hitting concrete.”

“Con what?”

Twice now. I'm going to have to adjust to stop doing that. “It will be like hitting ground!”

“The water is deep enough nearby. We won't hit the bottom.”

“No. Water surface tension. It will be like hitting ground!”

“Everything will be okay.”

Emerging from the camp now, behind us and ahead of us, dozens of angry amazons, armed to the teeth, bow strings taut got us in their sights. She didn't stop running.

“Rosette?”

“Because,” Her talons dug into the earth as she came to a skidding halt. “I'm,” She turned to face the cliff edge and leaped off into the air, “In love!”

There were a few moments of weightlessness as we both reached the apex of our current parabolic trajectory into the water below. Even if we didn't die on impact, I was bound and tied; I'd sink like a rock and drown for sure. While I was nursing those thoughts, Rosette shifted her hands, hugging me tightly around the shoulder and my lower back. As she held me tightly against herself I felt a sense of relief, even as our fall turned us over head first heading into the water some distance below. How far was it? I couldn't even guess myself. It was dark, and it was coming right at me. No vertigo or life flashing before my eyes prepared me for hitting the water. It happened very quickly and was accompanied by a loud slap, splash and the sound of rushing water in my ears. Rosette had not let go at all. If her words were an assurance she was going to protect me, she was living by them right now. With her hands busy holding me to her and weighed down, how did she intend to swim? That thought quickly came to mind before I noticed we were being carried down stream, and her tail behind her swished back and forth like a rudder or a crocodile's tail, propelling us further down river quickly.

At least Rosette was courteous enough to help lift my head above the roiling waters to take a few quick breathes of air as the river carried us further down stream, until I felt smooth rocks on my back, and the two of us ground to a halt. The shallow water let me pull my own currently worm-like body upwards and take a breath of my own, and Rosette, picking me up in her arms, slogged her way across the shallow river bed to dry land nearby. Her resilience was amazing, as was her stamina. The last few minutes were a blur, but the camp was barely visible upriver anymore. There was only a faint light and plumes of smoke in the far distance billowing up into the moonlit and starry sky.

I felt suddenly and violently closer to the ground. Rosette had collapsed to her knees while carrying me to the soft soil by the river's edge. Her breathing was heavy and pained. She laid me down on the ground and stood back up. Standing up seemed to be very painful for her, and she was swaying back and forth slightly groggy and woozy. Her face was downcast, so I couldn't read her expression at all. It was then that I noticed what was wrong. Her back was a pincushion. At least a dozen arrow shafts and their fletching were jutting out of her

back and along the back of her thighs and calves.

"Rosette? Are you going to be alright? Rosette!" I was not alright with what I was seeing. She looked up and smiled at me, a smile that was no doubt supposed to put me at ease, but it was pained and sad to look at.

She took a few steps back away from me and into the river again where the water came up to her knees. I struggled and writhed, still tied up and helpless. Calling out her name and trying to do something, anything, I noticed her face wasn't only pained, but its color was off. It wasn't pale from blood loss, it was necrotic, black and dreadful looking. Without the water to wash away the blood, it was streaming down from her back into the water around her, like her wounds hadn't or been denied the ability to clot. The way she held me floating down river, she had done that to shield me from the Amazon archers who peered over the edge of the cliff to fire down at us. Why was she going this far for me? What was she thinking? What was she going to gain? I knew the answers to these questions, but I didn't want to address that. I felt as though I was watching this girl barely standing in the river before me dying for my sake, and I didn't like it at all. It made me feel powerless and angry. Or maybe I was angry for another reason.

She forced her smile wider than before, but instead of wavering she spread her legs wide and hunched over. Her tail raised into the air behind her and she took an exaggerated breath of air.

"Close...Y-your eyes." That was the last thing she said, a warning.

I didn't take it completely to heart, but my body did it for me when a flare was set off in front of me, and my eyes winced shut from the sudden painful flash of light. She was only a scant seven meters away, and I felt as though I was standing near a wide open blast furnace. A fatal heat blazed just in front of my nose. After the initial explosion, I opened my eyes to see a brilliant light exploding from Rosette's tail and some grass only a few centimeters from my face which had been blackened to ragged strips of black petrified ash. The river surrounding her was boiling and was violently turning to steam. The arrow shafts embedded in her back no doubt were incinerated in an instant. Just as quickly as the spectacle had started, the flame on her tail and the heat around her returned to normal. There was a ring of scorched earth, but no raging inferno left behind.

Her skin had returned to normal, and she had regained her

balance. She walked across the now barren area of the river bed toward me and stepped ashore and plopped down against a tree beside me. She was still breathing heavily, and she was a bit pale, but she seemed otherwise alright if only a little winded. It was a first, seeing this apparently boundlessly energetic girl sapped. She looked at me slightly apprehensively while she sat there; she wanted to say something, but she couldn't muster either the words or the strength.

My face was frozen in shock, but I still managed to break the silence, “That was amazing.”

She had looked a little sad, worried even, but now it was her turn to be shocked.

I forgot about how silly I must have looked there, laying on the ground like a worm and looking up at her gushing, “So you can control your body temperature. If you did it that much, the arrows in your back, they'd incinerate. Wounds would cauterize. Even poison in your blood would denature from the heat.”

Rosette's voice was weak, “You don't think that was...”

“Was what?”

“No. Nothing.” She smiled at me again, “You're a good person after all, husband.”

I was a bit caught up in the moment, and that last bit brought me back down to the complicated situation I was in. Here was this woman. Not quite human, monstrous even. She had tried to kill me, maim me, harm me, and she raped me. Then she hunted me, eventually found me and rescued me. Declared love for me and then saved my life. My mind was a mess, and I didn't have the slightest idea what was appropriate or the right thing to do. What I wanted to do was nowhere to be seen either. I thought I could muster a few words or come to some decision, anything to pay her back, but I had been so preoccupied with my own survival, even when Rosette seemed to be more concerned with mine rather than with hers, that, not only did I feel powerless, I was starting to feel like an asshole.

I had to say something; but when I looked back up at her, she had already stood back up. Her eyes were alert, and her hand was ready on her sword's hilt. I followed her gaze; wading up through the shallow water on the river was another familiar face. A tall muscular woman with white-purplish hair wielding a massive iron sword; her face ridden with ill intent. The amazon Tauari had somehow followed us

and was bearing down on the two of us.

She stopped to square off against Rosette and threw down her gauntlet, “Return it to me.”

Anger was one of things I had not yet heard from Rosette, but it was undeniable that I was hearing it now when she growled back, “Over my dead body.”

Tauari flashed a wicked grin, “That's what I intend. Lizard.”

Chapter 6

A light roar of white roiled water swept past two warriors' legs; a cloud of steam lingering in the air punctuated by a quiet hiss of boiling water around the woman standing between me and a mountain of a woman. All I could do was taste the dirt on the bank of the river, completely tied up and immobile. I was the lone spectator; and judging by the blood lust fueled eyes of the amazon, this confrontation was serious. The lizard-girl did not flinch; and although her back was facing me, the whipping of her tail to and fro crowned by a brilliant crest of fire burning out of control gave me all the hints I needed; she felt the same as her opponent.

It seemed I was to be the prize in what felt like a fight to the death. I'll have to ask for forgiveness that my concern wasn't that I was going to watch someone get killed in front of me, but that I wasn't sure whom I was going to be better off with. I hadn't been treated to the greatest hospitality by either. Actions speak louder than words after all. I may also need to be forgiven if I let it get to me that two beautiful women were prepared to fight to the death over me. Somewhere deep down I'm a little flattered, I had to admit, but I had to shake my head to rid myself of that thought; it wasn't going to be any help to me at the moment. Despite their mostly human appearances, they were monstrous on the inside, especially inside their heads.

While occupying myself with my thoughts and wriggling on the ground to struggle against my bonds, I tried to calmly think of what I needed to do next. This imminent fight could take only a few seconds; I'd never crawl away like a worm fast enough. I was certain the following rape would not be prevented, only made worse, by being completely exhausted and making them irate they had to hunt me down again. Upon realizing that I was just wearing myself out I came to a stop and noticed sharp pressure jutting into my back. I felt like I was laying down on a bed of rocks. Judging by how much it hurt, enough to cause me to sit up straight, there was at least one very sharp rock. That's when it finally hit me, with enough rubbing and friction, maybe I could chew through the ropes strand by strand.

No sooner than I started getting to work, swaying my back side to side over the ground and grinding the ropes away, there was the sound of splashing water. The two women leaped at each other swinging their weapons in a blur, only becoming solid again when they connected edge to edge. Like a hammer on an anvil the clang echoed, and the blades sparked off one another. Using the momentum gained from repelling, each followed up on with their next swing. The same

blows were exchanged again and again. Rosette, the lizard-girl, was prodding her opponent for an opening; one she was having trouble finding. Tauari, the amazon, remained unmoving like a wall and retaliated with a fresh counterattack after each parry. Her attacks were getting heavier and heavier until the last blow exchanged between the two sent Rosette skidding backwards a good five or six meters throwing water and pebbles into the air.

Rosette shifted her feet, talons, whatever was appropriate, and tossed her sword into her left claw. She charged forward once again; this time attacking with long swinging arcs and spinning herself round and round in front of her opponent, side to side. It was a series of blows filled with feints and quick footwork, but the amazon remained unchanged and instead kept moving forward, controlling the fight. Rosette was now not even attempting to match blows with Tauari. Not after one of these blurs, from what I could see, when blocked threw her so far back she had to duck and dodge out of the way from a devastatingly violent swing of that massive slab of iron the amazon was swinging around as if it weighed nothing.

This fight before my eyes had finally reached the beginning of the end. Each had sized up the other, the cautious strikes of each had ceased. Tauari had become confident she was stronger and had better reach. Rosette was trying to make up for both by being faster, but she didn't seem to have that either; she was switching styles and stances rapidly, desperately trying to find a groove she could use to turn the tides back to her favor. Only thirty seconds had passed and already Tauari had let loose enough that Rosette could not hope to clash blades with her again. Just the crushing force of the blades meeting could injure her arms. The situation got progressively worse and worse for the lizard-girl; she couldn't get her edge anywhere near the towering amazon, and she could only keep backing up and avoid Tauari for so long.

Her balance also seemed to falter, and she shook her head from time to time to give herself a mental slap on the face, and her eyes blinked repeatedly to shake off a bad case of sleep eye. The flame on her tail seemed to sputter every so often, as though her tank was empty, and she was running on fumes. After watching her burn off those wounds, I don't think it is far fetched of me to conclude I was looking at someone fighting far at their full capacity. While they stood and watched one another, I could see the faint traces of pale scar tissue that had yet to tan and fully heal. She seemed far more sluggish than her daring sprint through the camp while carrying me. Purging all that poison and healing those wounds took a lot out of her. Perhaps

she hadn't healed those wounds at all? They were no longer open, but her muscles could very well still be a mess underneath. The odds were starting to look out of her favor.

During the whole spectacle, I had been working my back against the stones underneath listening to the grinding of dried plant fiber until I could finally hear the fraying and snapping of rope. I could finally feel my tied wrists behind my back and slide them up and down my spine. It was a minor victory, but I hurriedly continued to free my wrists. I could at least drag myself away, maybe even tear the other ropes off me and make my escape. If the fight would just keep going, maybe I could get far enough away, if I kept running maybe I'd eventually lose my pursuers. Ideas on the exact details of my escape plan swirled in my head till I looked back over at the ensuing otherworldly fight before me. I caught a glimpse of Rosette's face. She was leaning over and breathing heavily, but a smile curled the edges of her mouth. Then those amber crocodile eyes met my eyes for just a moment. She flashed me a full toothy grin before throwing herself back into the fray.

Charging at the amazon recklessly headfirst, Rosette tried to restart her offensive. Her charge was met with a heavy horizontal swing from the amazon's massive sword, but this time the lizard-girl didn't leap back or duck down to avoid the attack; she leaped over the blow. Like an acrobat, she flipped and rotated above the amazon's head and, whilst sailing over, swung down at her head. Tauari, although with an astonished look on her face, brought her sword upwards faster than it had moved the whole time, sending Rosette off balance. She landed too close and received a well placed kick to her stomach as payment for her display. It was a savage blow that knocked her on her back and kept her rolling backwards, skidding against the surface of the water till she righted herself some distance away. She held a claw against the red mark on her stomach; but undeterred, she charged forward again.

I was fixated on the spectacle before me, but my wrists hadn't stopped moving over the rocks behind me, and I finally felt and heard the satisfying snap I had been waiting for. I strained with all my strength and threw my arms up, and a bundle of ropes holding me fell off. In my hurry and exhilaration, I tried to stand up, but nearly fell face first when I felt a bundle of ropes still tying my ankles together. Sitting with my back against a tree, I frantically pulled at the horrid looking knots tying my legs together with my newly liberated hands. Once again, my eyes were drawn to the fight taking place on the river.

Rosette seemed to be getting worn down as time went on. The girl, who seemed to have boundless energy, proved to be mortal. She was being forced onto the defensive, and her windows of attack were becoming few and far between. That smile she wore on her face that usually betrayed her enjoyment was being twisted into pain and desperation. Tauari hadn't let up, nor did she look pained or fatigued; the handicap before this fight was unjustly in her favor. Rosette's attacks changed constantly, most likely in attempt to change the flow of battle. Her footwork was fast and precise, and her attacks fresh and intuitive, but she was slowing down. She was losing. Everything she tried, every trick and skill she had was no good if she didn't have the same strength and speed to pull it off. There was no other choice for her but to play her trump card. Rosette steadied herself; and after giving out a short yell, her flame exploded. The ridge of flame on her tail flared violently and tripled in size, and the water surrounding her vaporized into steam. It was just like what she had done before, but it was not quelled as fast. She was without a doubt pouring all the energy she had into this. Better to let it all out in perhaps one last attack rather than have that slowly chipped away in a futile endeavor of attrition.

Her sword illuminated from base to tip, glowing red just like her tail whose flame grew stronger and rose higher. The entire length of the blade, after only a few seconds, had completely transformed from a dull iron to a vibrant red, red as her crimson hair and scales. It was as though the sword itself had become enchanted. Was it a plus one or two fire enchantments? Was the blade heated to such a point that it would melt everything it came into contact with? Was it encased in some kind of plasma? I don't know. I won't even begin to assume I know. All I knew was that it looked dangerous; the moment it touched water, that water exploded violently into vapor. I wouldn't want to watch it make contact with flesh.

Tauari was forced to remain at bay while Rosette continued to explode and be engulfed in flame. Super hot steam violently swirled around her, and I doubt Tauari would remain unscathed and without burns if she strayed carelessly close. While the two squared off, I pulled at the ropes tying my legs until they finally came loose; and so I wouldn't trip, I slipped off the bundle of ropes from the other leg. I was treated to the feeling of being able to stand of my own free will after so long. While desperately looking around for a path to make my escape, I laid my eyes on a pile of objects on the ground, all my belongings. My bags full of blankets, clothes, my sword and other hastily grabbed relics from home. The lizard had dragged me here for a reason after all. The surly amazon must have either not noticed or valued my

belongings when she kidnapped me and left them by the bush. Rosette must have found them and brought them with her then waited at the camp till night. I threw myself before it and onto my knees to gather my supplies into my arms, but once again my eyes were pulled to the fight behind me.

The flames on Rosette's tail had stabilized, but they still burned much higher and brighter than normal, and she charged the amazon. An afterimage followed her sword like the taillight of a car at night and swung down overhead on the amazon's own blade. There they collided, and Rosette's blade bent at a forty five degree angle three quarters down the blade. Tauari was unfazed. Taurai's counterattack then caught the sword near the tip, bent Rosette's sword again and tore it completely off from the spot of the previous clash. The twisted piece of metal was sent spiraling into the river leaving Rosette with nothing but a broken sword. Sensing the end of the battle, the amazon threw herself at the lizard-girl with a cascade of attacks. Still burning bright; but breathing heavily and wincing in pain, she was trying to duck, dodge and leap away from the attacks, but each blow was getting closer and closer to hitting its mark.

I didn't have much longer until the fight reached its conclusion; I had to hurry. But I started to have doubts on what I needed to hurry and do. Words kept assailing my mind along with images.

I said you're my husband.

The image of the nude woman sitting atop of me, violently holding me tight, talons digging into my skin.

I still have a lot of things to learn about being a wife.

The image of a fierce and violent woman blushing and squirming on the spot like an embarrassed school-girl

My name is Rosette. They call me the Thorn Knight, and you can call me Rose.

The image of the girl standing above me, punctured with several arrows sticking out from her back, herself poisoned and dying smiling down at me.

I'm. In. Love!

I clenched both my fists and gritted my teeth, “God dammit!” I screamed out and pulled my sword from the pile and threw my

shoulder back, “Rose!”

I added a few steps to my momentum, drew my arm back and tossed the sword end over end towards the river. Soft earth below me gave way, and I lost my balance and fell face first into the wet soil. Looking back up, I watched the sword twirl in the air as it miraculously continued on its trajectory to Rosette. Hearing her name and spotting the object coming at her, she deftly plucked it from the air by the hilt. Still burning bright, the sword from guard to tip burned a brilliant white in an instant. Tauari brought down her next attack, and the freshly armed Rosette hurried to block the deathblow. The two swords met, but this time Tauari's sword passed through Rosette's guard, but it only did so missing its tip.

Flying off into the distance and landing further up the river, the end of the amazon's massive sword was sheared clear off. All three of us remained stunned for a brief moment before Tauari's battle instincts compelled her to continue, but once again a section of her sword was sheared off when it collided with Rosette's guard. A chunk of iron whizzed over my head and embedded itself into a tree trunk behind me. For the first time Tauari was forced onto her heels, and Rosette pressed forward. A new chunk was sheared off her sword every time she swung; until finally, all she was left holding was little more than a hilt. I was amazed myself, then it made sense, if Rosette's blade was being heated, and it had to then compete with the strength of the other sword. She wanted the edge of her sword to melt through the other sword. It would make your own sword softer, an unavoidable risk, but one made with space-age steel even heated and made softer would win every time against a lump of iron of questionable purity. The color from her face drained, and Rosette held her white hot edge just in front of the amazon's neck.

“Coward!” The amazon cried out, “Lizard, do you need slaves to win your battles for you!” Her voice was shaking with rage.

Rosette did not say anything in response.

“Strike me down then coward. I curse you. You cold blooded weakling!”

The amazon lunged forward but was only rewarded with the flat edge of a blade pressed against the back of the knee, searing flesh and sending the hulking woman into the water. Tauari pulled herself up kneeling in the water with a sword raised and prepared to strike the back of her neck.

I needed to act fast, so I scrambled to my feet and threw myself into the water and reached out, “Rose, wait!”

The two warriors stopped and looked at me wading my way toward them. Rosette was confused, Tauari disgusted.

“That's enough Rose. You don't have to go any further.”

Rose pulled the sword away from the back of the amazon's neck; the white light subsided, and the flame erupting from her tail returned to normal.

I held out my hand, “Rose, come on, let's go.”

Rosette looked at me and then back at the Amazon, but eventually she relented and walked around the amazon and seized my hand in her claw. I was a bit taken aback, but she looked incredibly happy.

“What are you doing?” Tauari spat, “Go ahead and finish it.”

“I don't think we will.” I spat out in response. I drowned out my embarrassment by lashing out at the defeated warrior.

The amazon's face became grave, and her eyebrows furrowed, “Your mercy is not.”

“Please,” I interrupted. “I'm not that naive. This isn't mercy. Only the dead get to curse the living, and you're going to have a much harder time having to go back alive.”

Her expression grew dark and distressed, but I pressed on my words becoming more venomous as I continued.

“You were always fighting the two of us; you just stopped paying attention to what I was doing. We were both trying to escape after all. And you lost because of a slave, an escaping man. That's a shame that's better than you dying after what you intended to do to me.”

Tauari's shoulders dropped; my words hit hard; it must have meant that what I was saying was true. Rosette was stilling standing beside me, holding onto my hand. I could feel she was watching me, that made me feel incredibly nervous, and I had to try hard to turned my face toward her to see an expression of hers that was studying me

which then had her gaze lock with mine.

I swallowed, “How about we get going?”

Rosette smiled in response and unexpectedly pulled me along as she turned her back and walked to the shore's edge. She picked up my belongings, handed them to me and then continued onward stringing me along forcing me to match her pace. I had tried to act cool, certainly failed at the end, and I was starting to wonder, while being pulled by this girl who was almost skipping now, if I had made the right decision after all as the two of us disappeared into the forest.

Chapter 7

Night had once again returned to the forest; a fire crackled in front of me, and a fresh pair of unsoiled clothes clung to me. It was warm, but I was not sure if I was safe. It was dark; clouds hung overhead which blocked out the light of the moon, a moon, not the moon. I had to remind myself I wasn't out camping or hunting back home anymore. The chilly air fueled by a light breeze and the start of a rain shower kept me in place by the fire. I was alone for the time being. If I was going to make a break for it, now would have been the chance, but I decided to stop listening to that voice. It hadn't made my situation any better recently. It was only delaying the inevitable after all. I decided to remain still, not to hide, but simply to wait. After waiting for more than an hour I was no longer alone.

I saw a light from beyond the camp approach closer and closer until a silhouette of a woman joined it. It wasn't someone with a torch; it was a woman, part reptile, red scales and a tail crested with fire. She was a woman, a fine one at that, mostly human, but not quite. In her claws, she held a couple of dead rabbits that she presented to me with a smile on her face. She came up next to the fire, walked around it and sat down beside me. Right beside me. A burning cedar smell she gave off mixed with fresh blood from the blood of her successful hunt. From her waist, she produced a knife and went to work skinning the lagomorphs.

She stopped momentarily to look at me. I had a feeling I knew what she was going to ask before she said it, “It's okay. I've been there for skinning before.”

Seeing I was not going to take offense, she carried on and tore the hides from the rabbits and then hung them over the fire before us. Not a single word was said after that and an awkward silence hung in the air. I stole a glance at her and noticed the pleasant smile on her face. I was the only one feeling awkward at all it seemed. That silence was then broken by the sound of rain falling above us and onto the leafy canopy above; only a small portion of the rain fell down upon us. With the wind and the fire only so large, there was still an unmistakable chill. I curled up further and rubbed my hands together. There was then another sound, something sliding on the dirt as the lizard-girl beside me scooted herself closer to me. Her body pressed against my own, her legs touching mine, her right breast resting against my left arm and her head tilted so that her cheek resting on my shoulder. This caused me to shudder even more, which caused her to scoot closer until she was resting her full weight on my side. Eventually I stopped

shaking, perhaps my nerves finally realized they were only making things worse. Maybe her body heat had seeped into myself.

If I was left alone to my thoughts any longer I might start wigging out at any moment, so I forced myself to break the silence, “You're not angry are you?”

“Why would I be” She asked.

“I interrupted your fight.”

“Oh. That?” She paused to think about it for a moment, “Guess I'm a little mad.” I was going to say something but she continued, “I'm a little happy too... That you did that for me.”

That was incredibly presumptuous of her; it made me defensive immediately, “No I-”

“Yes you,” she interrupted.

“It was for the best outcome.”

“You could have run.”
“Not very far.”

“You can run pretty fast.”

I felt her gaze on me, and it pulled forward. My head was forced by it to turn and see her looking up at me. I then saw those amber crocodile eyes with their black slit pupils. I then also saw her lips, and I could feel my own mouth water and my throat dry up. It felt as though her face was growing closer; and when I noticed it was, I snapped out of it, pulled my head back, looked away and bit my lower lip. My was heart throbbing painfully in my chest. The awkward silence returned, and we both looked down at the ground.

A few moments later, I felt the weight lift off my side and heard a rattle. Kneeling she had turned to face me; and with both claws holding the blade up, she implored me, “Here. I'll return your sword to you.” Her voice was heavy with a sense of forlorn sadness to it.

I looked down at the sword, turned to face her, still sitting myself and reached out. I put my hands over her claws and lightly wrapped her fingers around the blade.

“No. You should keep it. It's much better in your hands than mine. You lost your own for my sake right? It's the least I can do. It must have been important to you.”

I felt it was the right thing to do. She nearly died twice dragging me out from that tight spot. Since the hours after that, she hadn't attacked me once; she was rather out of character, so I had noticed. I felt at ease with that gesture, and I looked up at her to see her face was once again lit with a bright and beaming smile, her fiery tail swishing back and forth excitedly behind her. She sheathed the sword away behind her back and then threw herself on me; her arms wrapped around me, and we slammed into the ground. I felt her cheek rub on my own.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you! I'll take care of it, always. I promise I will, husband.”

“Husband? Wait-”

“It's my first gift from my husband. I should have never doubted you felt that way”

“No, wait-” I had a hard time breathing after that as she her hug clung even tighter than before.

“I don't need a fancy wedding. Something like this is perfect vow for me!”

Wait. Wedding? What? Where? How? Did I just stumble into culture shock? My mind was reeling and not just from the lack of oxygen. Although that wasn't being helped by the smell of burning flesh. I realized it probably wasn't me, but I spotted the rabbits on the fire burning.

“The rabbits. Rosette, the rabbits!”

The girl paused for a moment, sniffed the air and then let go and jumped back in a panic and stuck her claws into the fire. I instinctively reached out to say something and stop her, but she seemed completely unaffected by the fire. Of course she was; I'd seen her raise her body temperature to impossible levels, sticking her hand into a fire would be nothing.

“Safe.” She said and then showered me with a smile while holding the well done rabbits in her claw.

I looked at her and couldn't help but laugh at how ridiculous my situation was. She soon joined in jovially. Her joining in wasn't exactly expected or completely welcome, but I wasn't in any mood to stop her myself.

Dirty again and slightly soaked from what little rain fell upon us we each tore away at the charred rabbits for dinner. They weren't burned all the way through, so it was still quite palatable. After the very long day I had, I'm not confident I would have stopped eating if the rabbit was charred to a cinder. Not a word was said while we were busy eating, but before I was finished myself I was interrupted by a hand, claw, on my shoulder shaking me back and forth. I stopped eating to see that while I was only half done Rosette had already devoured the rabbit whole, bones and all by the looks of it. And I thought I had been ravenous.

She looked like she wanted to ask me a question, so I put down what remained of my rabbit and asked, “Yes Rosette?”

She puffed her cheeks and pouted, “I told you to call me Rose.”

“Well I-”

“You called me Rose before.”

“What? When?”

“In the heat of battle, I heard you call out my name,” She raised her claws to her cheeks and swooned. “It made my heart flutter, and when I saw you were helping me I fell in love all over again.”

A dubious and complex expression spread across my face.

“And you're so cute when you look like that too, husband.”

Embarrassed, I slapped both my hands against my face a few times to wipe away that expression and replace it with a poker face, but it wasn't long before she threw herself on me again and pinned my shoulders against the ground as she hung over me.

Her voice was hot, heavy and seductive, “Husband.”

It made my face flush as she positioned herself to pin me further to the ground.

“Wait just a- You don't have to call me-”

“I've told you my name, but you haven't even told me yours. That's mean.”

She was drawing closer and in a panic, I decided to spit it out, “M-my name is-” A sharp pain stabbed into my brain, and a chill ran down my spine. Color drained from my face, and a realization hit me.

I can't remember my name.

Maybe just a bit of amnesia, I've hit my head a few times. I've taken a few beatings since I've come here from home. Home. Earth, from-

Where exactly was I from again.

The panic in my heart doubled, and my heart went from frozen to pounding out of control. So I was lost and didn't even remember where I was supposed to find home. But I still had to head home. After all, waiting there were friends and family-

I couldn't recall their names or faces.

Now was the time to panic I thought. I started to hyperventilate, and a ringing in my ears shell shocked me. I felt myself shaking, but I realized that was because Rosette was hanging above me shaking my shoulders with a terrified look on her face. Her lips were moving; she was saying something, but I didn't know what. Neither could I muster anything to say, that was until she slapped me across the face.

“What's wrong? What's happening?” She was panicked; she looked almost as panicked as I was.

I felt the shell-shock pass, and it was replaced with tears instead that I couldn't stop flowing from my eyes, “I don't remember who I am.” The tears flowed down my face. “I don't know how to get home. Those tears reached the ground. “But I still have to go home!”

The girl fell down on top of me and wrapped her arms around me and held me tight to herself. One of her claws cradled the back of my head and rubbed it gently. She held me until I managed to bite down and swallow my panic and sit myself back up after a couple of minutes. I rubbed by eyes. It was unsightly of me I knew; I was rather ashamed of it, but I couldn't stop it twice today. I felt sick to my stomach already, and this didn't help at all. I looked back at Rosette.

“I know who you are,” she said. “You're my husband. You're not a bad person. You're not a weak person.”

It was odd seeing the bright, tomboyish and energetic lizard-girl look so serious right now.

“You might think it is weird. But I love you. You're the man I love.”

“Why-”

“There is no reason why.”

I chuckled a little, “It's poor form to take advantage someone so distressed.”

“I don't care. Even if you hate me. You'll still be my husband. Even if I get angry you'll still be my first, one and only husband.”

She's hardly being fair. I'm not the kind of man who can listen to sincere words like that from a pretty girl and not-

Rosette pulled something out from under my shirt collar and held it up between the two of us. A bulb of lavender. A eureka moment spread over her face, “Lavender. That'll be your name!”

“That's hardly a man's-”

“Laven. We'll settle on Laven. This reminds me of when we first met.” She said, rolling the bulb of lavender between her thumb and index finger.

“Wait just a- I'd rather not remember when we first met-”

“Laven. Husband,” She let that sink in for a moment, then let go of my shoulders and sat up, “We will go home. I will take you there. I promise you that.”

She didn't know what she was talking about, but I'd have to lie to say that it didn't make me feel any better. Rosette, the lizard-girl, got off me and stood back up and pounded her fist against her heart in a salute of solidarity. I pulled myself to my feet as well and held out my hand. She looked at for a moment then put her claw in mine, and I shook it. She looked at me puzzled.

“This is how people from where I'm from greet and agree on things.”

A bright smile beamed from her, and she took my hand in both her claws and shook it up and down excitably almost throwing me off balance. “Do you have any clue where your home is? I want to meet your parents.” Her smile was replaced by a nervous expression, “Maybe they wouldn't like a monster like me.” One thing after another gushed out of her mouth uncontrollably.

“I'm sure they'd be excited if a girl followed me home. Wouldn't matter if she was a lizard-girl.”

“Not a lizard-girl.” She said very angrily, so much so it took me by surprise. Her next words were back to normal though, “I am proud Salamander, not just any lizard-girl.”

A salamander. And not the amphibious kind I first assumed. The fire lizard type. The ones that lived in and around volcanoes. That's quite the fantastical monster. I was struck by a bad thought at just that moment. I'd heard of such a creature in fantasy. From some work of fiction, video or role playing game. Then I remembered the pig girls, there was also another type of monster that were like human pigs. They were called orcs. I don't even need to mention the Amazons, more brutal than I thought they were. There was a pattern though, and even Rosette matched it, even if she was by orders of magnitude more benevolent. Monsters of this place were, so far, all women, all quite beautiful and all interested in sex, even if they need to force it. This whole world might just be-

“Laven... Husband.” Rosette caught my attention through embarrassment the second time; I was getting worried she was learning what buttons to push. “Do you have any hint to start with?”

I had only the vaguest of ideas. I only knew my home wasn't of this world. Perhaps not even this universe or dimension. “I'm from a place called Earth.”

“Earth? Okay, we're on earth.”

I felt sucker punched. Was this some sort of Planet of the Apes moment. Was I going to have to throw myself to the ground and curse everyone, “No wait-”

She squatted down and picked up a clawful of dirt and let it sift through, “See, earth. You're standing on it.”

I felt instantly relieved, “No, they call the world I'm from The Earth.”

“That's not a very imaginative name, is it?” Her expression wasn't wry, it was serious. “I thought, while looking at you, you were supposed to be smart.”

That last bit hurt a little, but getting mad wouldn't help. We were just having a breakdown in communication, “No. It's not this world. They also call it Terra.”

“Terra's just another name for earth isn't it?”

My head was hurting again.

“It's alright husband. You've had a rough time. We'll head for town, get a few good sleeps. You'll remember something, and we'll find someone somewhere who can help. I promised you tha-”

Rosette swayed on her feet a bit and looked ready to topple over; my reflexes took over, and I rushed over to catch her fall, “Rose!”

“I'm a bit dizzy. I think I used up too much energy today. Need to catch up on sleep.” She looked me in the eyes, “You called me by my name again.” She closed her eyes and smiled before she nodded off completely and passed out in my arms.

She was surprisingly light for the weight she could throw around. I felt a certain gentleman in my heart had been touched so I lifted her up in both arms and moved her over to a dry spot on the forest floor protected from the rain above and laid her down. Draping one of my blankets over her, I pulled one out for myself, found a similar spot on the opposite side of the fire and bundled myself up for warmth. A part of myself ridiculed the rest before the exhaustion caught up, and I drifted off to sleep comfortably for the first time in quite some time.

Chapter 8

“Prepare yourself, henchman of King Tom!” The young boy shouted, waving a stick in the air, draped in a makeshift cloak of a patchwork blanket, a pot on his head and a piece of cardboard tied around his chest. Shaking the stick at a metal garbage bin he issued his challenge, “Iron Golem, your reign of terror ends today, Sir Tamerlion has come for you!”

The boy armed with the stick swung with all his might and thrashed the defenseless garbage bin. A cacophony of clangs echoed, and the aluminum siding dented and caved. Finally, the series of blows brought the bin down; its lid popped open, and the contents spilled onto the ground.

The boy leaped back with surprise, eyes wide with fright, “The Iron Golem ate people; it was a vampire iron golem,” he said with a trembling voice. That look of shock soon curled into a smile, “But the demon is defeated, a small task for the great Sir Tamerlion! It won't hurt anymore again.”

A door slamming open revealed a middle-aged woman with frazzled hair who stormed in on the dramatic scene. I watched from the sidelines; and although I had a clear court-side seat, I could make no distinction of her facial features. A blank void was there where a face should have been. Despite that, I could feel her gaze taking in the scene of the costumed boy standing over the mess he had created.

“What are you- what do you think you're doing?” Her voice was stern, swallowing her anger and trying to keep her voice under control.

“Mom! I've defeated the Iron Golem!” Said the boy gaily in response.

The mother cradled her temples in her thumb and index finger, “Pick all that up and get back inside. Now.” She spat out losing some control of her temper.

“But the Iron Golem's guts are cursed.”

“Then use a pair of gloves in the garage. Clean up your mess. And get back inside in five minutes. Or else.”

Slamming the door behind she disappeared back into the house, and the young boy cast his eyes down. His game of pretend

came to an abrupt end. The jovial look of victory in his eyes was replaced with guilt. Gathering the pieces of garbage and plastic bags he strained and struggled to return the garbage bin upright. He then cleaned up the mess scattered mess diligently. The mess was soon cleaned up but not without a cloud of sadness hanging over him. I watched the boy labor away, standing not more than three meters away, yet no one noticed or acknowledged my presence. When I looked around, a suburban neighbourhood obscured a short distance away by a grey mist spread in all directions. When I looked back at the boy, I noticed his eyes, hair and studied his face.

“Is that me?” I asked aloud.

The boy didn't say anything at all. I suppose I was like a ghost. Maybe this was some memory. Perhaps I was dreaming as my messed up brain tried to piece together the broken parts of my head that had been jumbled up like a thousand piece puzzle after being dropped from a skyscraper. With the job finished, the boy gathered up his playthings and returned indoors. I followed behind him, a door shutting in my face; I flinched, but nothing crushed my nose, instead the door closed and passed right through me. I guess that settled the question of my specter status. I followed the boy who gripped a corner tight and spied on what I soon saw as I brazenly rounded the corner myself; the mother sitting at a desk on the phone.

“I said I was sorry. I had to check up on my son. Look, I know you have kids too so get off my back about putting you on hold. Yes, I know you're busy. Look. I need to know if you can ship out the new linen by this weekend. Don't give me your, 'why?' It's the long weekend, and the restaurant has all its tables reserved each day.” The mother caught the child spying on her, asked the person on the phone to hold and very impatiently asked, “Yes? What is it? Mommy is busy.”

“Is dad coming back for the weekend?”

The mother sighed an obviously tired reply, “I don't know. Your dad is far away on a business trip.” A muffled voice was audible from the receiver, and so the mother hastily brought it back to her ear, “Can you not yell please? I was talking to my son. Don't give me that again, I know you have kids too.”

Dejected, the kid let go of the corner and climbed the stairs of the home to the second story. I followed him to a room at the end of the hallway upstairs; a child's room filled with posters, toys of all types scattered around the floor, stuffed animals, various characters from

shows and a myriad of other things. There the boy sat down on the floor and picked up a picture book. A book about knights and dragons, princesses and chivalry.

Quickly the boy's spirit was restored, and he jumped back up and pulled the stick that was tucked under his belt and waved it around, “Sir Tamerlion will save the kingdom!” He leaped onto the bed and jumped up and down. “Evil King Tom has taken good king Tim's throne while he's gone. And he poisoned the other knights of the table and put them to sleep; but as long as Knight Tamerlion rides, King Tom will never win!” The boy jumped from the bed and hit the floor.

A rush of wind blew across the scenery surrounding me. I closed my eyes and shielded my face with my forearm, and when the wind passed I spotted myself, grown; the very man I was now standing tall with the same pose, still with the same old and faded blanket draped over his shoulders and a pot on his head, lifting my sword into the air.

That other me proudly declared, “And Sir Tamerlion will rescue Princesses Kim!”

That performance was met with a pair's laughter; seated on a couch nearby was a couple, their faces blank and featureless, the man's voice crisp and clear, “Man, sometimes you're just too much.”

A girl seated beside him was clutching her sides, “You spent all that money for that?”

“Just letting myself partake in a little nostalgia,” the other me shrugged and returned the sword to its scabbard. “I always wanted a real one when I was a kid. I remembered it a few weeks ago; and with a little extra cash from a care package from home, I did some research and ordered one to be forged online.”

The man leaned forward and asked, “And when you said you weren't gonna join us last night, you were waiting for the postman?”

The other me squirmed and tried to dodge the question, “I didn't want to have to walk from the post office to my apartment with a suspicious looking package.”

“Is that even legal to have at all?” The girl's voice was a little mocking and disdainful now.

My reaction was quick and pointed “Yes. It's a replica; it's legal to own it.”

The girl leaned back in her seat; the other me with a scowl had eyes that were digging into her. It seems I had lost my temper a little at her attitude. At a loss, the girl shut up and closed herself up. The man sitting beside her leaped off the couch and put himself between her and me. He came to her defence and threw himself into the line of fire. I suppose this guy was a friend by how familiar he talked with me, and this woman must be his girlfriend of something.

“Can I hold it man?”

Without any hesitation, I handed over the scabbard, “Sure. Just be careful it's actually sharp.”

The man carefully and respectfully took it in his hands and drew it. Flicking his thumb over the tip and edge, he looked at the other me and chuckled, giving out a, “holy shit” and held it out a bit.

“How much did you spend on it man? A hundred?”

“A few hundred.”

The man's voice betrayed any surprise he tried to hide, “What? Holy shit man.”

“Hold it up, you can see how they made it by pounding it. It's the real thing.”

“You know, if you just wanted to play pretend, you could have just bought a cheap knock off. You got school to pay for don't you?”

I held out my hand and took back the sword and put it away, “I know. I'm fine. Thanks for asking. I don't bother you if your bank account is doing alright when you go out and get hammered every weekend.”

“You need to come out more often man. The other guys miss you too. You just stay in here studying, reading and playing video games all day. We hardly see you.”

“I don't do well in bars and stuff.” My response was rather cold compared to how lighthearted it was a moment ago.

My friend raised his hands and backed down and took a look at the girl on the couch. I couldn't see either of their faces, but the change in his posture and just by looking at her cross armed I could tell by the body language what was going on.

“Well man, you enjoy yourself tonight. If you change your mind, the DD can come and get you.”

“Yeah yeah.”

The other me watched the two pick themselves up and let themselves out, walking past me who had been watching from the corner of the room by the door. While the other me turned around to clean up and put his makeshift costume away I heard the exchange between the two as they headed toward the door.

“What a loser,” the girlfriend whispered.

Her boyfriend tried to play her down, “Hey now. He's been a good friend of ours forever. He's a funny guy when you get him out.”

“Did you see how he looked at me?”

“You just hit a nerve. He treats everyone the same, even girls. If you piss him off he's not gonna hold back.”

“I think he needs to get laid.”

The door shut behind the two, and silence returned to the apartment. I followed into the other room where the other me had disappeared to see him sitting on the edge of a bed, the sword resting on the covers; in his hands was an old faded picture book, the same one he had been reading when I saw myself as a kid. My face was a little muddled, a hard to read expression. I didn't even remember enough to figure out why I would wear such an expression on my face, but as I studied it I didn't even notice the same grey mist at the edges of the dream was getting closer, and the world was slowly crumbling toward where I was watching from.

“Laven. Wake up Laven. Hey. Laven. Wake up.” A familiar voice filled the air. First quiet but getting louder all the time.

I felt the ground shake beneath my feet, or perhaps, since I seemed to be standing on nothing by now, I was shaking back and forth. Before I had a chance to experience vertigo when I looked down to check, I felt myself falling gently before my dream faded to black as I

returned to the real world. Maybe the real world was a bad way to put it. It was at least a real world.

My eyes opened, and my senses were assailed, a bright sun shining behind the canopy overhead. I smelled fresh dew and wet soil, heard songbirds chirping in the early morning and felt something soft clinging to me. Hanging on me like a body pillow, Rosette's face was hovering only a few centimeters to my side. When I turned my face toward her, her bangs tickled the edge of my nose, and her amber crocodile eyes locked onto me. My body seized up in an instant; a gaze like that has been filed away in human instinct as belonging to a predator, and danger was the only thing is signaled in my brain. Pulling myself away was not possible though; my left arm was sandwiched completely between her breasts, her legs crossed over mine and her arms wrapped around me.

Her inquisitive face, upon realizing I was now awake, turned into an eager toothy smile; and before I knew what was going on, I felt my arm stretch, and her body moved with lightning speed. I was left completely immobile as she had put me into a perfect straight arm bar before I realized fully what was happening. She playfully pulled on my arm; I felt my shoulder and elbow joint being pulled, gently at first, but gradually being overextended painfully. Still half asleep, I entered into a panic quickly and tried in vain to loosen her grip, but Rosette calmly held her lock and gradually increased the pressure. I stomped my foot on the ground, and she let go. Before I could nurse my shoulder, she leaped onto me and pinned me to the ground, hovering over me on her knees, claws pinning my shoulders.

“You've got good reflexes, but you're still too tired when you wake up.” That familiar playful predatory smile crept back onto her face, “You lost, now you gotta pay the price.”

Rosette let go of my shoulders and quickly pressed the palms of her claws against both my cheeks, and her lips came down suddenly and pressed deeply against my own. She moaned, and I felt a tickling of air from her nose onto my face. Her eyes were shut as she tried to force her tongue into my mouth as her weight shifted to and fro on top of me as if she was trying to grind herself closer to me. There was an incredible amount of heat coming off her, and I felt it seeping into myself, and I almost relaxed and lost control. Instead I bridged my hips and threw my weight sideways. With a cute yelp, Rosette found herself unexpectedly thrown off to the side, and I quickly got back onto my feet. Raising my hands as fists to the side of my face, I squared off against the salamander; who got back up to her feet as well.

She wore a confounded expression, a little disappointed as well, but she studied me while we circled around each other and around the burnt out fireplace in the middle of the camp, and she soon had that same signature smile of hers again. I was through with running away; it wouldn't do me any good. If I could escape, I'd find myself back to square one, but I wasn't about to roll over and accept everything that she was pushing on me. There was a tinge of pride in me that wouldn't allow that. I was still flushed with heat though. Even after separating it didn't go away, my cheeks still felt red hot, and a foreign sweet taste still lingered in my mouth. When I studied Rosette as well, she was red from ear to ear; her tail swishing behind her a raging inferno.

I must have lost my focus because a cloud of dirt erupted behind her; and with a talon foot dug into the dirt and kicking off, Rosette flew towards me. She was fast, but she wasn't coming in for an attack. Her hands were stretched out which caught me off guard as I spread my own to catch her. Her arms wrapped around my back and mine around hers, and the momentum she carried knocked me onto my back. I didn't hit the ground softy at all, and it left me winded, but there was a girl on top of me, rubbing her cheek into my chest gleefully.

“What were you dreaming about?” She asked suddenly.

I had a hard time keeping up with the pace she was setting, “I don't know.” I felt an awkward silence and a bit of pouting on her end so I continued, “I think I was just seeing a few memories.”

“Who's Kim?”

Now the mood had changed from awkward to worrisome, I felt a heat come off Rosette, and it wasn't a pleasant warm one like before; it was a hot and uncomfortable, and it was causing me to sweat. I squirmed under the heat, and that didn't make the situation any better. I wasn't even sure who she was talking about; I don't remember anyone named Kim from anywhere at any time.

Rosette lifted herself off my chest and stared right me with furrowed brows, “Who's Kim?”

If it wasn't obvious by now, she was quite mad. I might be so brazen to say that she was jealous. I was looking up at her dumbfounded, an expression which seemed to be making her mood worse. Was I dreaming something? Remembering dreams after you

wake up isn't the easiest thing after all.

“Why bring this up now?”

“You were calling out that name in your sleep.”

“I was sleeping. I'm sure it was just nonsense.”

“No. You were saying it like it meant something. Who was she?”

“You're not making any sense-”

“Was she your girlfriend? Was she your wife? Who was she?”

“I don't know-”
“If she is, why are you so kind to me?”

That last one came out of left field. She was jealous, but she was equally concerned about something. Something she'd assumed by jumping to some conclusion without thinking again. I suppose that was just something she did all the time. Doing things without thinking. My mind was under pressure and racing for an escape route though, and the contents of my dream were being poured back into my head piecemeal.

I grabbed her shoulders and forced her to look at me and pay attention, “Calm down. I remember now. She was an imaginary friend. A character I made up when I played games of pretend as a kid. She doesn't exist; she's just something from a children's book.”

“Really?” Her voice was a little uncharacteristically meek. I didn't say anything, instead she just studied my face and let out a sigh. Her face once again brightened up into a smile, and she shook my shoulders, “What kind of girl was she then? Come on. Tell me.”

“Just a run of the mill damsel in distress.”

“Some fair skinned girl with long curly blonde hair? Thin and frail? Come on!”

“What? That was ten years ago, I don't remember!” I tried to think of a way to disarm the situation as my brain rattled inside my head. The only coherent thought I could come up was to change the subject, “And what did you mean, 'why are you so kind to me?'”

“N-nothing at all. Forget about that part.” She got off me and stood back up and stretched her back. “Anyways, we need to get going. There's a town about a day away.”

I wasn't going to pry, now wasn't the time; but from how sure she was with her directions, I couldn't stop from asking, “Only a day? I walked around the forest for almost a whole day and didn't see any end of it.”

“I've been in the woods her for a month now. I'm almost out of goods, not enough for two.”

“A whole month?”

“I heard there was a strong fighter up in these woods. A boss orc. I wanted to fight her.” Her voice trailed off in a sense of longing and disappointment. That brought back a bad memory, so I bit my tongue and didn't say a thing, so she continued, “But I promised we're gonna find your home. There's no time for me to hunt her down now. So we're gonna find someone who knows a thing or two. We gotta go south to do that.”

“You're just going to drop everything for-”

Rosette turned around, striking a pose; an index finger pointed at me, her other hand resting on her chest with legs poised and dramatic, “You're my husband. Of course I will help you.” She reached out with her hand; and taking it, she pulled me up off the ground. “It's our first adventure. I'm with my lovely darling Laven. I could not be any happier. I've dreamed about this day all my life.” First adventure? Those words resonated in my head and made me worry a bit. “I was born to be your wife, and meeting you here; you were meant for me It was destiny. I won't ever let you go. Nowhere you can go where I won't follow. No obstacle I won't crush to not be separated.” She made a fist with her claw and punched a nearby tree, and the bark of the tree snapped and broke in a display of both strength and sincerity.

“And you don't have to worry either.” Rosette looked back at me while I dusted myself off. “I don't doubt you. I got nothing else, and I owe you my life many times over. I'm not gonna- whoa! Whoa! Whoa!” Rosette suddenly clung to me with a look of longing in her eyes, and my body seized up. At my panicked cries she relented sadly. “But that, I'm not totally comfortable with that. I-I hardly still know you!”

Rosette stepped back, extended a claw to cup my cheek

and confessed to me, “Laven is a very kind man. A very shy man who tries very hard to be brave. I may not be smart. I don't know anything about love; how to show it or make it. I didn't know a thing about till I met you, and I might not be smart, but I know one thing. You'll fall in love with me someday soon. Because it was meant to be.”

I was still shaking a little. Maybe I was worried she was right.

Chapter 9

A morning hike on a strange world, my feelings on the activity had changed dramatically over the past few days; it must be the power of good company. I hadn't been hounded, tied up or ruthlessly beaten yet. I couldn't say the same for the raping, but I figured that problem would eventually resolve itself. The lizard-girl who preferred to be called a salamander traversed over and around the forest floor debris almost in a skip, bursting with enthusiasm she couldn't contain. Although I was getting the impression she was not capable of self restraint, she had been making progress since our first meeting to keep her attacks rare. That may only be because she was busy walking backwards and waving her arms in large sweeping motions as she excitedly regaled me with stories of her previous adventures.

"A couple years ago I got hired by the Duke of Balcetia. That's a little swampy place southwest of here. Anyway, I was paid to bodyguard him during some civil war he had been fighting. One of those fat nobles who didn't fight himself and paid others to fight for his king."

"Why was there a civil war?" I interrupted. Rosette's expression went blank, and she stopped in her tracks. Shaking my head, I took the hint, "Okay okay, I get it. That isn't the important part of the story. Go on."

Her expression returning to its jovial state; she did just that, "It was a rough spot; all his counts had rebelled. He only had the knights from his own lands, and he was outnumbered five to one. None of his allies wanted to help him put it down either, but he was a stubborn guy. Maybe he was just stupid. Either way, I took the job because those odds told me there was going to be a good fight or two."

"And you were right." I said to encourage her and reassure I was paying attention.

"Half right. There were a lot of fights. But none of them were any good. Take this one count of his. Big man. A very big man." She extended her arms as wide as they'd go to the side and up. "A very large fat man, nothing but fat and muscle. They called him the Rook. Don't remember what his name was. The rebels besieged the Duke's castle and wanted to end it fast, so they attacked instead of waited. They send this guy up onto the wall, and everyone's scared spitless of him. I was paid well, so I stood up to him. He saw I was a salamander, made some cruel jokes about my appearance and threatened my

womanhood.” Stopping her story, she turned around and leaped right back into my face and excitedly continued, “He had this big axe; the head of it was huge; with the shaft it was as big as he was. I'd never seen a man try to swing around something like that before, so I got excited.” She stopped to stifle a laugh before going on, “He couldn't swing it, more like he'd drop it. He had reach; and if that fell on someone, it'd probably kill em, but it was way too slow.” Pulling her sword out she mimicked something like a baseball player readying a swing, “So he misses, and I step up,” Swinging the sword like a bat and wearing a huge smile she reaches her punchline, “So one swing and the belly of his armor caves, and he goes down for the count. I was disappointed, so I tried taking it out on the guys behind them, and they all ran.”

“You're telling me you won the battle?” I asked skeptically.

She thought about that for a moment, “I guess I did. No one wanted to fight after that. They all started running away when I chased them screaming, 'Monster! Monster!'” She impersonated the terrified men with a mocking voice, hands clutched in prayer, knees together and shaking her hips from side to side. “The Rook was the leader's champion, right hand man. They lost a lot of will to fight after that. Giving up after all that. There were a few more fights after that. Everyone just ran from me though, so I didn't have any fun.”

Fun. She used that word so lightly; a battle with the lives, pride, honor and livelihood on the line for hundreds and thousands of men, to her it was nothing at all but another chance for personal enjoyment. A pretty little girl like her, a small little girl like her who wasn't any taller than one hundred and sixty centimeters and couldn't weight much more than forty five kilograms drops a two hundred centimeter man weighing at least one hundred and thirty kilograms like he was no challenge at all. If you ignored below her knees, her forearms, her tail, her ears, her eyes and her teeth you could have mistaken her for just some other very pretty girl. What gave her that kind of strength and speed? There wasn't a wasted space of fat on her, nor did her form burst with muscle, just well toned lithe and feminine with a moderate tan. There were laws at work in this world that ignored my own common sense; that is all I could assume.

“After that, I got bored and went further north to here. Frontier country. A wild and lawless land. I thought to myself, 'how romantic'. I think there were quite few people angry at me after that whole war business to. So I thought I'd just go away for a bit.”

She paused for a second, and I had to interrupt, “I haven't met many monsters, so I can't say anything about all of them, but most of them so far seem to attack humans on sight. I can guess monsters aren't that well received. How did you even end up getting hired?”

Reaching to small leather bag tied to her waist, she untied it and tossed it toward me. I opened it and revealed a weathered slip of paper with strange markings on it and something that I couldn't confuse as anything other than a signature. I studied it for about half a minute, but it was Greek to me. I couldn't make heads or tails of it, so I slipped it back in and handed it back to Rosette.

“I still don't get it,” I confessed.

That caused her to actually stop in her tracks and stare at me with the most astonished look on her face. Her expression was one of shock and bewilderment.

Feeling a little out of place I squirmed a little under her gaze, “What does it say?”

“You can't read it?” her voice was muddled with a tone that was asking, 'what is wrong with you?' “You talk all fancy like, but you can't read?”

“Yes, I can read but not whatever alphabet this is.”

“But you speak it just fine.”

“I said I wasn't from here.”

By the expression on her face I saw that the gears in her head were trying to turn and make sense of what I just said. It was safe to assume that she was still not putting one and one together that I wasn't just foreign to this country but foreign to this entire world. I failed to explain it before; I wasn't entirely sure with whatever scope and breadth of wordily experience she had that she could even comprehend other worlds.

“The Free Ports guild. I'm a member.” She must have got the hint from my raised eyebrow that she had to give a full explanation. “The Free Ports are a bunch of cities on the coast way far south of here. They don't care much about kings and lords or religion; they just want to make money. Even if I'm a monster, I don't just go around attacking every man I meet, so I got a license to work and be a sell sword like anyone else.” Taking it out again she points to the scrawling

on the bottom, “See? A cardinal signed that, and this one here is from the mayor of Zelice; no one can stop me from going anywhere a human would want to go if I show anyone this.”

“So they both sign this because they earn a commission off each job you do?”

Rosette's eyes lit up, and she grabbed my hands in hers, and she jumped up and down with excitement, “You really are smart? You figured it out, and I didn't have to say a thing.”

She pulled me in closer and pressed up against me. My heart nearly blew something. It still wasn't getting used to this kind of physical contact with this girl.

“I put all the money I earned in the guild bank a friend of mine runs. She lends out that money which people need. If anyone stops me, no more money.”

I completed her point for her, “And no more money to borrow and finance whatever it is they do.”

“You really are smart. Really smart!”

“At a very low interest rate too I'd bet.”

Rosette tilted her head in puzzlement, “Inter rest?”

“When you pay back the money with a little extra. The cost of getting all that money at once.”

“Nah, she lets people borrow it; if they don't pay it back in time, she charges a fee that gets bigger the longer they don't.”

“I think that's the same thing.”

“No no. The Church doesn't like anyone making money like that for nothing.”

That reminded me of how the Catholic Church used to think back in the middle-age Europe. Maybe this world had a few things in common with my own. Given how archaic everything was here, maybe it was just another version of my own world a few hundred years ago. Perhaps I didn't have to fear that I was somewhere completely foreign and alien. Written word was different, but through luck and coincidence English or whatever language they called it that was spoken here was the same.

I felt a tug, and my hands were pulled forward and held between Rosette's warm breasts. I seized up at once while she spilled her heart out, “You've given me what is yours, and I'll give you what is mine.” My sword I'd gifted her rattled in its scabbard on her back, and she looked up at me excited, “My friend takes care of everything I've earned; I got a lot. I can bill everything on the guild. We could buy the largest house on the nicest shore. Servants and the like. We can go everywhere and anywhere. The best adventures and travel whenever. A small castle to return to. We can go home, where you call home.”

My head was spinning now, unable to calm my heart that was bouncing everywhere in my chest and sinking to my stomach. I didn't know what to say, so my heart took over, “You don't understand money at all do you?”

That wasn't the response she had been expecting; she could only let out a short, “Huh?”

“I mean you can't just buy those kinds of things right.” I backtracked when I figured out where the misunderstanding might come from, “I mean you don't; she really shouldn't try to bribe me with those kinds of things right? That isn't really what you want right?”

“Bribe?” She trailed off letting that word sink in. Then focused her gaze back on me with another one of her big smiles, “I knew it! You really are the best!”

She threw her arms around me once again and leaped onto me. I spun around in place and had to regain my balance quickly because of the girl who was hanging off me with all her weight. She was laughing joyously and planting kisses on my cheek.

I tried asking several times what she was doing and she eventually relented to say, “You really are a kind man. You really do care about me don't you? You really do right? You care for me than anything else?” Letting go she grabbed me by the hand; and calling back over her shoulder at me to, 'come on,' we ran through the forest. Why? Maybe that's just what she wanted. I didn't understand her at all.

Time and time again I seem to be running into little tests and traps this girl has set up, and each time I bumble over them only to find myself in a much worse situation than if had I just fallen into them. I was trying to dodge the question each time; but it seemed instead of disarming the situation, this girl kept falling deeper and deeper in love each time. I was still at loss at what to do with this girl. There were

equal parts terror and admiration for her in my gut. I was hardly in a position to offer anything, let alone myself, when I didn't know who I was or where I was from. So far from home, I didn't know the first step in getting back. If I kept her nearby, I'm sure I'd be much safer. I still didn't know who she was; but in that time, if my own mind and heart got sorted out, maybe I just might-

My own train of thought was cut short when the two of us emerged from the forest. At long last the sun shone overhead without a tree to block it. The uninhibited sunlight stung my eyes as they slowly adjusted. When I could finally see again, I saw fields, vast fields of pasture, farmers fields filled with crops and little hamlets scattered over the plains and meager hills before me. It was the outskirts of civilization. I noticed Rosette had stopped pulling me, but she had still not let go of my hand, and when my daze and astonishment had faded, she grinned and continued to pull me along our way.

She seemed never to tire, but I was certainly different. No attention was paid to my hoarse cracking throat, as I become increasingly winded and exhausted from the quick pace we made as the two of us dashed between tall stalks of unripe corn. She was in a hurry, that much I could tell. What I couldn't figure out is why she was in such a hurry. It was still the middle of the day, and the heat didn't help my exhaustion at all either.

When I felt like I was getting ready to die we finally came to a stop. My hand was freed, and my arm, feeling like it had been nearly pulled from its socket, cried in relief. I doubled over, holding myself up with my hands on my knees, and tried to catch my breath. In front of us was a dirt road in between the fields. Coming around the corner was an old man in typical peasant farmer's attire with a cart and horse. Standing tall, Rosette brazenly waved her arm at him and pointed to the rear end of his cart as he slowly lumbered toward us. He nodded, and Rosette leaped up on the edge of the cart. I watched astonished at the scene. Just how did this girl, a monster, get that kind of calm reaction? Then I got a good clear look at the milky eyes of the old man. He was nearly blind, and that explained that.

“Laven! Hurry or you'll get left behind!” called out Rosette slowly moving away.

I had completely spaced out as I watched the cart slowly pull away. Cursing underneath my breath, I broke off into a jog and grabbed onto the back of the cart and threw myself on, Rosette laughing away at the whole affair. The old man was listening and had

his own little chuckle too. 'Young couples these days' his face read. All my work to get my breath back had been wasted; but from one of her traveling bags, Rosette produced a water skin and shook it enticingly in front of me. My instincts got the better of me, and I eagerly extended my hand to receive it, but she pulled it back out of my reach. Without saying a word, she pointed to me, closed her eyes and opened her mouth. I bit my lips and let out a sigh, but I had no choice and complied as I was starting to feel light headed from dehydration.

I heard the sound of water sloshing next to me, but I hadn't even tasted a drop yet; I thought perhaps I was being teased again, but before I opened my eyes something soft pressed up against my lips, and a flow of water rushed into my mouth. I nearly choked but managed to swallow it all without getting it into my lungs. The surprise caused me to fall on my back; my legs still hanging off the edge of the cart. I only coughed a couple times and opened my eyes to see the salamander girl hovering over me with a mischievous grin. Before I was able to scold her, she leaned back and took another long swig from the skin and collapsed on top of me and pressed her lips against mine and force-fed me another mouthful of water again. I didn't cough or almost spit up this time; my cheeks felt flushed and red, and I was still a little upset. Before I could say another thing, she sat back up immediately, crossed her legs and sat stoically on the cart, scanning the area, looking oddly out of character and professional.

When I sat up I spied a couple walking along the road, bundles of sticks being carried on their back; they watched the two of us with curious and cautious gazes. They continued to watch until we were some distance away, and they carried on their way. From then on, Rosette did not make another move on me, nor did she meet my gaze. She continued to stand on guard. It was such a shocking reversal of what I had come to expect from her. Even for such a whimsical girl, there had to be a reason. When I thought back on it, her guild license; she said she wasn't just like any other monster throwing herself on any man. I think I was starting to understand what was going on. Being caught being flirtatious and lewd with a human would cause a great deal of trouble.

I had spent so long lost in thought that I had not noticed the cart come to a sudden stop. Looking over my shoulder, a stone wall had snuck up on me that extended far in each direction, the gate looming in front of the cart. A few words were exchanged between the old man and someone. That voice made its way to the back; two men wearing leather armour, iron helmets and held spears very cautiously, their knuckles white from gripping their weapons. One man was short

and fat, the other tall and skinny; both were rather unappealing in appearance, with bad teeth and an equally bad smell. They weren't the most shining example of a town guard, so I assumed they were, that I had come to expect.

“And your business here?” said the fat one rather rudely.

His voice was a little hoarse and croaked a bit; he was afraid that much for sure. After watching what Rosette was capable of, it would take a few dozen of these guys to begin causing her a little concern if she or they decided to get violent.

“Business. Resting in town for the night. Buying supplies and going beyond to the coast south.” Rosette’s voice was calm, practical and professional. She also produced the guild document for them to inspect.

The two of them looked it over and appeared like they'd never seen anything of the sort before. They handed it back carefully to her waiting claw before turning their attention to me. They had very dubious expressions on their face.

Looking at each other, the skinny one jogged off, and the fat one rudely pressed on, “Why you heading to the coast then?”

The smell off his breath was horrid and a little much for me; it forced me to look away, looking right into Rosette's eyes, a glimmer of her usual self hidden behind that business face of hers. Imploring, begging me to go on.

I decided to ad-lib, “My family from the Free Ports is surveying to decide if they're going to invest this far north. I'm returning home now, and I'm not too happy with the rude reception.” I wasn't going to score any points being timid now.

The fat man rebounded onto his heels; he was terrified, and putting up a strong front seemed to work, “Well, sir, my apologies, but a monster bodyguard-”

“Now you're telling me how to do business too?” I cut in with faux anger. I leaped down from the edge of the cart; I could feel Rosette almost reach out to stop me, but I was too into it now. “The best that money can buy for their son. I don't tell you how to go about your business; but when you get into a state of mind like that, I have to tell you that you'd best mind your position.”

The fat guard, now that I was towering a good head's height

above him, felt the pressure now, looking up at me and back to Rosette before backing down and taking a few steps back. He pulled at his collar with his index finger and was sweating.

I pressed on with the attack, “Maybe I'll bring this up inside-”

The skinny guard came rushing back and exchanged a few whispers with the fat man. Quickly they waved to someone up in the gatehouse, and the doors to leading into the town were swung open, and the two guards nervously returned to their posts. I climbed back onto the cart and entered the town, the large wooden doors swinging closed slowly behind it. I exhaled heavily and threw my head back. My heart was beating fast, and I was sweating a bit now, too. I felt something soft and scaled on my hand. Rosette was making a brief comforting gesture; she gave a wink and a quick smile out of the corner of her mouth and mouthed, 'good job.'

We rode the cart until Rosette jumped off, and I followed suit. The cart and man carried on without a care, no need for payment, nor did he stay for a word of thanks. I thought it was an oddly kind gesture, but it wasn't as odd when I noticed why Rosette had suddenly leaped off the cart. All around were the stands for a market place; but no matter where I looked, not a soul walked the streets. I tried to ask her what was wrong, but the sound of hooves and boots on mud and the clink of weapons sounded behind us.

Emerging from the alleyways were heavily armored and armed men on foot and horseback; they approached and surrounded the two of us standing in the middle of the abandoned streets. I watched as the shutters of the houses surrounding us filled with many shy and frightened eyes watching what was happening below. They did not draw their weapons, nor did they close in uncomfortably close, but they did cut off escape in any direction. A man in elegant white robes rode forward and dismounted alone. His hat was gilded; the hem of his robe trailed in the mud, but he didn't have a care in the world about that. His eyes were locked on to the two of us. His face was young, his eyes were naturally squinted almost shut and he wore a creepy smile from ear to ear.

“Welcome welcome,” he said. His voice was equally creepy, and I had no feeling for it other than disgust. “Welcome to Brun. I'm sure the people here seldom see a sight like this in all their days this far north. That's both you, and I mind you. A guilded monster and sympathizer.” I watched as the man's eyes finally opened, a dark brown, almost black eyes, “And the inquisition.”

Chapter 10

I wish I could have claimed this turn of events was completely unexpected. My hindsight was currently lecturing me on all the subtle warning signs I could have picked up on. Instead of picking up on the fear and worry lingering on the faces of the peasantry, which I assumed were the superstitions from a bygone age, I landed myself in yet another disaster. I had long abandoned the thought that this girl I was traveling with would keep me away from trouble; trouble seemed to follow, at worst she seemed to flourish in its presence and sought it out. I would have to start taking it upon myself to keep myself out of harms way. Being surrounded by heavily armored and professional thugs and being leered at by a pair of sociopathic eyes was a very bad place to start doing so.

The tell-tale word, Inquisition, something you read about in books and movies; not something you get threatened with, certainly not when you're a strange man in a strange land standing before agents of an institution hell-bent on ensuring the populace remains faithful to some religion with customs and beliefs you haven't the slightest idea of. It's hard to know when you've broken some rule under the punishment of heinous torture or death.

The Inquisitor spoke up, “How rude of me. Forgetting to introduce myself. You will have to forgive me.”

He didn't bow, extend a handshake or remove that obnoxious hat of his; he remained stiff as a board. I took that as another bad sign.

“I am Inquisitor Zerin.” His head slowly swept to Rosette and back to me, “And the Thorn Knight, your reputation proceeds you.”

I attempted to get a word in edgewise, “We're just passing through. Don't mind-”

“Oh, but I do mind!” His voice was tinted with some very not so subtle mockery, almost babyish, “The poor merchant's son lost so far from home. In the company of evil's spawn no less. Such a disgraceful display. Such poor execution of judgement. A monster escort? This far north? Surely they should have taught you better.” His voice took another one hundred eighty degree turn toward cold and insidious, “In the northern lands where the peace with God is kept proper, these things are not condoned.”

I once more tried to speak, but I was again cut off when he began spewing vitriol again.

“But alas, such a sad fate of the poor wandering merchant boy! Surely the deviant, this monster, this hell spawn has taken you hostage!”

My heart thumped in my chest. I suppose he was right in a sense. A hostage free to go where he wills, but with a captor that will not leave him.

“The fiery Thorn Knight! Clawing her way up from the depths of hell to prey upon the poor meager souls of mortal God fearing men! To think a guild member of the Free Ports, someone with the trust of the Doges and consent of the church would betray her terms! To think the honorable Thorn Knight would bring herself down to acting like the other licentious beasts!” A single eye opened which stared at me, implored me and advised me to play along, “If proof of such a misdeed, just a few simple words, if they were to fall upon my ears, I would have to act! I would act and within my power restore order and see the guilty see their just punishment!”

And there is where I caught on. He definitely had a theatrical flair to him. It almost reminded me of a certain Salamander. I nearly turned my head to get one last look at Rosette. I was curious what the expression on her face was. Instead, I cast my eyes down on the muddy street. If there ever was a chance to get out of the situation I had been thrown, now was certainly it. I raised my eyes from the street. Along the way I spotted out of the corner of my eye my own shadow and another beside it. I could almost not see the difference, except for the tail. Stiff and unmoving it hung there always burning, but now barely burning. Before my gaze returned to the Inquisitor, I shut my eyes and took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

I opened my eyes and locked them onto Zerin's own gaze, “No. She's with me.”

At first his face didn't budge. Not a single emotion slipped through. In return, I continued to glare at him. I tried my best to stare him down, but a sudden radiation of warmth on my side forced me to crack a wry smile. I said I wasn't going to run away; I decided I was going to keep my word. There was no way for me to know what was going through this sadistic man's head; but given the choice between the two, I think it was a safer bet to put my life in the hands, claws rather, of the one who risked her own life to save my own.

“Sir, you are quite the mystery to me.” Zerin's eyes, barely

visible behind his squint gleamed for a moment. The pleasantries were dropped. His attitude, his posture and his tone of voice, all of it shifted very suddenly like a cat's curious and malicious stare. I suppose that would make me the mouse which had just become aware of its surroundings but too late. “Now that I think of it, those are odd garments you're wearing. I do not believe I've seen such a fashion in the Free Ports. Nor anywhere.”

So my little make believe at the gate was no longer going to be taken at face value? I suppose it was easiest to kill a nobody after all. Just a few choice words and he was already at the walls of my cover story. There was an inflection in his voice that was a cocktail of false joviality and sloth that betrayed how fast he worked. I had to admit; I was impressed with that well practiced demeanor. It was soothing in a way; it was as if he was hiding the knife he'd slit my throat with. He was saving me the time I'd spend panicking for the last bit of my life if he simply waved it in front of my face. If he hadn't blatantly confessed who he was, anyone might believe he was anything other than a ruthless murderer. I looked back and forth for the smallest chance of an opening to escape, but the eyes of the people, watching from the buildings surrounding us, were tired and resigned; it was as if something terrible had already happened, but they were dulled to it.

I risked a glance to my side to see Rosette poised like a bow, pulled back and ready to let loose. Every muscle on her was tense and her claws, stiff and motionless. It reminded me of a gunman in a Spaghetti Western. In a single movement she'd draw that sword, the men surrounding would arm themselves and it would get very bloody very quickly. I've seen what she is capable of, but I wouldn't risk her life or my own by fighting our way out. They were all armed and, no doubt, well trained fighters; how they compared to seven foot tall Amazons I didn't know. I wasn't willing to find out.

My options were dwindling, each thread I found was being cut by this Inquisitor, one by one, as if it was a sick game to him to prolong his business here. Ignorance of whatever law or custom I had broken wasn't going to be a defense. Stupidity wouldn't fare much better, that option was long gone now. All I had left was madness.

I flashed the man a smile, “No Mr. Inquisitor, not anywhere. Just anywhen.”

An awkward silence fell over the gathering. I kept eye contact with the Inquisitor and didn't break it. I simply smiled back at him with the exact same smile he graced me with. He stared at me as if he was trying to dig right down into my soul. What I had said wasn't technically

wrong; I may as well be from the future relative to where I was now. I didn't know exactly where I was in relation to my home, but I was hundreds of years beyond what era this world was wallowing in. If he had a talent for discerning lies—some special gift or even magic I couldn't comprehend—there was no way he would be to tell if I was lying. For just one brief moment, a lapse in his professional face told me that I got under his skin. The corners of his lips curled, and his brow twitched involuntarily.

I decided to continue, “I'd tell you where I came from, but I can't quite tell you about a place that doesn't exist. Yet.” I punctuated by raised my hands palms up and shrugging my shoulders.

The reaction was terrific. It wasn't obvious; it was very subtle, but even I could spot the evaporation of the professionally pleasant smile as his face turned to a bitter hostile desert. Being mocked was certainly not something this man was accustomed to. Was he ready to persecute a fool? Was he really ready to do something like that in front of an audience? My options were rather limited. I had thought of trying to explain other worlds, worm holes and other science fiction explanations for my being here, but I decided against it. I had to be more subtle than that. The same reaction was shared by everyone watching; they all looked at each other to see if there was anyone among them who had any idea what I was talking about. Even Rosette was baffled. I merely gave her a wink to play along or continue staying quiet.

Covered head to toe in thick plate armor atop her steed, the voice of a young woman interrupted, “Sir Zerin-”

The Inquisitor Zerin held up his hand to silence her before he continued, “Perhaps you do not understand the seriousness of this encounter.” There were daggers in his eyes, even if his voice was straining to keep that signature professional and calm kindness.

“Did we accidentally get in the way of your little parade down the street?” I proposed nonchalantly. “Your lecture is a little off-topic if that's it.”

I looked over my shoulder toward Rosette on reflex and regretted it. There was fear in her eyes the likes of which I had not seen. I realized something so simple as innocent until proven guilty may not apply to my situation right now. When I put two and two together I remembered where I was. My long-shot chance may have not helped the situation at all. My options had run out, and I was sure to face the consequences of them failing.

Zerin continued, almost seething through his teeth, “In the presence of the detestable, despicable and vile creatures beyond the realms of men. The worst display of heresy imaginable.”

That alone was enough for a series of dots to connect. My thoughts and feelings on the hospitality that Rosette had offered to me as a stranger and then as a mate, so she claimed, were definitely an outlier compared to the other receptions I received. The looks on the villagers' faces as the two of us passed by filled with a sense of dread toward another. Rosette had looked so calm, cool and professional; I had let my own guard down and simply allowed myself to be carried along with the flow.

My next words came out in a panic, “She hasn't done a thing.”

The atmosphere had changed quite a bit now. It seemed my act was also over. Zerin's expression changed; his anger seemed to have subsided. His smile returned. What was alarming about that smile was that this time it seemed genuine. His face looked like he had been let in on some great joke at my expense. I turned to look at Rosette again, and I finally understood where I had been making my mistake all along. Her face carried the same amount of worry and fear, but her eyes looked at me not as if asking for help. She wasn't worried for herself; she was concerned about me.

Gleefully Zerin continued, “The Thorn Knight. She is an esteemed gilded individual with a writ signed by many powers that be that lie outside my own grasp. I may not approve, but it is not my duty to advise the hands of those with the power to sign their signatures on such a document.” His cold dead eyes opened once again and looked right at me. “Within my power is to punish men for breaking the covenant.”

I hurried to defend myself; my words almost tripping over each other, “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Your feinted ignorance does not amuse me.” Zerin raised his voice and cut me off. “By the covenant of The One God no son of man shall consort and lay with something of another being. All followers of his will shall be baptized and brought under his love and protection. To shield their stray souls from the winds of cruelty that sweep the earth. Never shall he forsake those who offer their complete love onto him, for those bodies and minds which do not turn to evil will

forever have his love in this life and the next. His hand will protect them from the wicked evils that live outside his light and prey upon his children."

My own panic had itself turned to anger, and I lashed out, "And your point is?"

"I find you guilty of breaking the most sacred rule of the covenant!"

"What proof do you have?"

"By the grace of God who entrusted me with eyes that no lie can fool! I can see your guilt in every fiber of your being!"

Persecution for having relationships and sex with monsters? I could certainly understand the anger after being victimized. Being hunted for half a day by a group of flirtatious and curvaceous brutes and enslaved by muscular warrior women may cause some animosity between the captor and the captive. But turning on the victim and purging them? I thought it was mad at best and vicious at worst. Were the people so powerless that they had to turn their anger on those attacked and taken prisoner? Perhaps some men threw themselves into the wild willingly, and this kind of overreaction was to prevent feeding the monsters what they wanted?

While lost in thought, I was brought back to reality when I sensed Rosette shifting beside me. I saw Zerin's armed escort prepare to draw their weapons as well. A fight would break out very soon, and it would be very deadly. I'm sure many of those surrounding us would die, but I was far from confident the two of us would make it out alive as well. That kind of thought probably didn't occur to her though; fighting was the only option running through her head; she probably held off until now only because of me. So I flung my arm over to stop Rosette.

"This is absurd! You don't have a shred of proof. I've done nothing wrong."

I put the emphasis on myself. Clearly Rosette was guilty so far as this man was concerned, but there was no way I was going to run away or turn her in. I had given my word that I wouldn't. This world was clearly more messed up than I would have imagined; and as crazy as it sounded, I felt much safer with her. My gesture was to hold her back, plead decency and avoid a blood bath. I had hoped it would cause the parties to yield. I didn't think through quite all the way. My hand ran into

something before my elbow had fully extended. Something soft and, by now, rather familiar. My palm clasped around something very warm. I didn't bother to look. I didn't have to; I was still staring Zerin straight in the face; I stared at him after having wiped my face of any expression. Once again, I had changed the mood with a single swift action. It was rather impressive talent I discovered I had. Although I wouldn't say it was a welcome time to find out.

I let out a sigh and quietly muttered a ritualistic penance for my blunder under my breath, “Ah, fuck me.”

Zerin's expression exploded in a fury, “You dare make a mockery of the covenant before my eyes? Your callous disregard for the order that keeps the realms of men safe-” Now Zerin was almost tripping over his own words, although that didn't stop him from his formal speech. “You desire proof? Do the people desire proof? Then here, let your soul sear!”

From his cloak Zerin pulled a small glass bottle, adorned with an exotic glassware stopper corked on top. Inside sloshed a liquid that was set loose with the stopper pulled furiously loose. I had no idea what was happening, but my reflexes brought my arms in front to shield me as Zerin flung his arm wildly to splash whatever contents inside that bottle toward me. I heard a short cry of despair beside me, the clatter of a weapon being drawn and, with it, many more surrounding. A clawed hand reached out toward me, but it wasn't fast enough. I was drenched in some liquid; it felt oily, viscous but had no smell at all. I felt a crush of force closing in on the two of us.

I threw my arm back and connected with Rosette's shoulder; I pushed her back and cried out, “No!”

Events once again came to a standstill. I don't know why one word that I could mutter could have such an effect, but as I wiped the clear oily liquid from my eyes I looked at Zerin once again. His own face was filled with bewilderment. As I looked around, I saw many other faces shared his same confusion. From the windows up high and down below, the people who had hid behind started opening them one by one to see what had just occurred. My eyes last fell on Rosette; even she wore a face of disbelief.

“What the hell was that for? What the fuck is this stuff? What the fuck is wrong with you?” All the tension was causing me to throw a tantrum. I didn't allow myself to feel embarrassed over it. I've had a rather stressful couple of days.

“There's no way. How could you still be-?”

“Do you decide to just attack anyone when you feel like it? You've made a career out of doing this?”

I wasn't speaking to Zerin in particular; I was protesting, but the exchange seemed to have been noticed by the audience that was watching. Some had gotten into my mouth, and I spat it out onto the street as I tried to wipe it from my eyes. It had no smell, but it tasted like pureed grass. Don't ask me how I know. I felt insulted. All that build up, I expected some dagger pushed into my heart, or an arrow planted in my chest. It wasn't even acid; I felt as though I had been duped. No sensation of burning or even mild skin irritation. I had prepared to at least meet my own execution in the coolest way I could. It was all rather insulting.

From a window on a second story a woman shouted, “What about my son! Was he guilty?”

Another followed her own, a gruff man's voice, “My brother hung last week! Was he really guilty?”

A slow tide of townspeople began to show their faces and talk amongst themselves. The more they talked, the angrier they got. That one female knight trotted forward on her horse and leaned down to speak into the ear of Zerin who was still reeling. With a few choice words from her, he looked around to finally noticed his surroundings. The people had begun to emerge as a mob of angry citizens. The kind of angry mob that wants answers but is more likely to break out in violence before getting around to asking questions or waiting around long enough to get an answer they want to hear. Clenching his teeth, he called for his horse, which was brought by a young squire. The reigns were rudely seized from him, and Zerin mounted. With his retinue following behind, they rode off in a column around Rosette and me and made their way toward the gate behind us.

I stood there confused with Rosette. Almost as soon as Zerin had arrived, he had suddenly left. If I wasn't still dripping wet from the oil he had splashed all over me I might have been able to write off what happened as a fevered dream. I was ready to collect myself and move on when the new crowd had gathered around us. A crowd of townsfolk, young and old, man, woman and child. They watched Rosette with worry, but their eyes were mostly fixated on me. There was an apprehension hanging in the air that was so thick I felt like I

could choke on it. They looked stuck halfway between being terrified and thankful. As though they wanted to raise me on their shoulders for chasing away the boogeyman but held back for fear of their own safety. After all, I was covered in something that was supposedly flammable as far as they knew.

From the crowd emerged an old man; judging from his brown robes and a bald head, he was some man of the cloth. In his hands, he carried a rag. He stepped forward from the crowd which had formed at least four arm's lengths around us, bowing first before offering the rag toward me. The formality caught me off guard, and I bowed in return before accepting it and wiping myself off. I offered it back to the old man when I had finished. The man studied the wet rag, rubbing some of the oil between his fingers and holding it up to his eye to inspect it closely.

He announced in a raspy voice for those present to hear, “By the Almighty. It is real!” The crowd erupted into a flurry of activity as they gossiped among themselves. “Pray tell good sir. How is it that you still stand? What of the fire of divine retribution?”

I wasn't sure what the old man was going on about, and I had to ask, “Divine retribution?”

“Holy water burns away impurity of the soul. For those souls tainted by committing the gravest of sins the soul burns away along with it. All children of the almighty, baptized in his glory pay such a price!”

I could only shrug, “I guess I'm innocent?”

The crowd erupted all at once and became alive with conversation. Dozens of people all at once trying to understand something they had seen. Something that seemed incomprehensible to them. They seemed to have all but forgotten the two of us still standing dumbfounded in the middle of them all. The old man, a priest of some sort, was being pulled back despite his protests by some new group of armed men. In the distance at the other end of the crowd some people had started trying to break through.

A sharp tap on the shoulder reminded me that Rosette was only just beside me. Before the new welcoming party arrived, she could not help but ask, “You weren't... baptized?” The inflection in her voice told me she wasn't sure exactly what that was.

“Well. I was baptized a Lutheran. Not whatever they're

talking about."

"A what?"

"Not by choice. I was only a few months old. Never attended a service in my life."

Rosette looked at with the most puzzled face I had seen on her yet. I knew that didn't answer her question, but there wasn't any time to explain myself or listen to me try and rationalize what just happened when a new group of armed men broke through the crowd. They were a motley crew, definitely much poorer and less armed and armored. They were probably the town guard that had been in hiding until now. I couldn't blame them, but they certainly arrived fast, probably to save face as the law of this town. A ragtag group of nine men split, six pushed the crowd back while one guarded on his two flanks approached with a hand on his hilt.

"Deputy Marlow, Brun Militia." His introduction was very curt.

He was a very round man. A round head and a sizable gut. His features were very soft and babyish, but his eyes were not the least bit inviting. Something he might have had to train himself, or the product of some very harsh life lessons for someone who'd usually look the pushover type.

I was still a little confused and looked around before responding myself, "Laven." An awkward silence hung over us. "And this is-"

"I know of the Thorn Knight." He interrupted rather rudely and said nothing more.

"You're not going to get promoted unless you work on your people skills." I waited for a response, but instead he only furrowed his eyebrows. "Look, if you're done here, I'm soaked, tired, I need a bath, a change of clothes and an actual bed. If you could get out of the-"

"Mister Laven, you're to wait here and not move. I am under the authority to put you under-"

Rosette nearly exploded beside me, "He will not be arrested." The usually carefree, happy and energetic Rosette growled in the most surly way and stared down the deputy.

Everything came to a screeching halt. The crowd grew silent. The armed men holding them at bay froze in place, and the three men

before us became petrified. Even I was taken aback. Although I wasn't the target of that hostility which seemed to radiate blood lust, I watched as the amusing looking deputy—who tried his best to appear professional and dependable—broke out in a cold sweat and wasn't able to speak another word. Maybe he was neurotic and sweats a lot, or perhaps it was Rosette whose tail had grown into an inferno and radiated what was probably a punishing heat. I suppose, if I wanted to the two of us could probably just walk away at this point. I doubt anyone here would try to stop us. Although I did feel sorry for Marlow. He just thought he'd do his job. It was probably for the best that he kept his mouth shut though. I had the impression, from the short time I've known Rosette, that she was itching to let loose. Fighting was always at the forefront of her mind; and after holding her back, she might just let loose for the most tangentially related reason or most pathetic of excuses.

"That's quite enough Marlow." A gruff voice pushed its way through the crowd

That voice belonged to a man who for once looked like a proper man of law enforcement. If by proper you accepted a stereotypical character from a 1970's police drama complete with the typical mustache, at least he otherwise looked built and suited for the job. A very well presented man: groomed, well dressed, armored.

"You'll have to forgive my Deputy here. The last few weeks have been very stressful for Brun. Mister?"

"Laven, Sir." Marlow answered immediately.

"Mister Laven." he repeated. "I am Charles Ceerly. Sheriff of Brun." Charles removed his glove and held out his hand. The sudden appearance of someone with manners caught me almost completely off guard, so I didn't immediately reach out in return. It was a very stern but earnest force in his hand.

I noticed that he did not offer the same pleasantries to Rosette. Everyone wanted to pretend that she didn't exist. It's as though her very existence was an anathema. Now that I once again had the time to collect my thoughts, Zerin did say something about heresy and consorting with monsters. Are the people so terrified of not only the monsters themselves but having the finger pointed at them by the Church? That one priest they dragged away, the one rambling, seemed ready to begin proselytizing and performing an on-the-spot exorcism and seemed alarmed I had not been suddenly struck down

by a bolt of lightning. If I was being sentenced to death for having sex with a monster, well I was certainly guilty of that, not by choice, but I was guilty all the same.

"If you would please come with us Mister Laven. We'd like you to answer some questions for us."

Marlow in a panic scrambled to stop his superior officer, "Ceerly, Sir. That's-."

I could feel Rosette burning beside me. I could hear the cracking of her knuckles as she clenched her claws, her serrated teeth grinding against each other and her tail whipping back and forth quickly burning higher and higher. The spectacle definitely got the attention of everyone present as they all started gasping in surprise and pushing backwards; the crowd seemed ready to stampede at a moment's notice.

I hissed through my teeth to whisper to her, "Rosette. Calm down." She didn't react at all. She was still poised for combat. "Rosette. Knock it off." Still no change. I placed my hand gently on her shoulder, "Rose."

The moment of contact caused her whole body to shiver, and the second I called out her name the third time she relaxed. She was still burning, and my hand felt like I had placed it directly on an electric heater. The crowd reacted in gasps as though they had witnessed the most scandalous thing ever. Even Marlow and Ceerly shifted uncomfortably. I thought they all needed a reality check; I was helping them by preventing this all in one walking meat processor and portable BBQ from giving a demonstration of her abilities.

I turned back to Ceerly, "If you want me off the streets so you can all get back to normal then fine. If you want questions answered though, I got a ton of my own."

Ceerly responded diligently, "Fine by me."

Chapter 11

Initially I had expected to be escorted to the guardhouse or some kind of police station, instead Ceerly and his goon squad of militiamen brought the two of us to a residence. It felt old, mostly because of all the archaic furniture and complete lack of modern comforts. It kept reminding me of where I was, some out of the way hinterlands of civilization. Ceerly had left us there and departed immediately after saying something about restoring order. It made sense to me; the people were angry and in a near panic. I wasn't clear on all the details as to why, but it was obvious there was more pent up than what just happened this morning. Some food or drink could have been prepared; the hospitality here was terrible.

We had waited for nearly an hour; the hard wooden chair ground against my bones, and no matter how often I shifted in discomfort it never got any better. Rosette remained standing, stalwart and on alert. She peered out of the window, paced back and forth and pulled her sword slightly out of its sheath every so often. It was obvious she was still very on edge. Her flame hadn't stopped burning even after all the waiting in crippling boredom. She clearly didn't believe we were safe yet. I had spent the better part of the first ten minutes trying to convince her to sit down, but she refused to do so each time. She was liable to leave permanent claw marks on the wood floor from moving back and forth so often.

Finally, the door swung open once again after an hour; the pudgy form of Marlow stood in the frame, but he stepped back to usher in someone else. Bound to a primitive wheelchair was an old man. There were few grey hairs left on his head, his eyes were sunken and his face withered like a prune. His arms and legs were thin as twigs, and his every breath seemed labored.

Marlow the dolt caught one of the wheels on the door frame and shook the old man violently; the old man's reaction was unexpectedly filled with vigor, “You useless sack of shit! Watch where you're pushing me.” Neurotic as ever Marlow apologized profusely and hurried the old man inside. He parked him in the middle of the room facing me. “You dumb sorry excuse for a man! Move that chair and let me talk to the man face to face!”

Marlow in a panic rushed over and pulled a chair out of the way opposite of my own, between us a low wooden table. There he parked the old man, and his eyes darted around the room. He seemed hounded by the idea that he was going to forget something else and

have the old man yell at him again. The old man simply stared at me and ignored the bumbling oaf. Eventually Marlow noticed the ever vigilant Rosette staring him down. His composure collapsed completely; he was overcome with an acute fear for his safety and decided to retreat back out the door. His footsteps plodded away down the hallway until another door opened and shut in the distance abandoning the house all together.

The old wasted no time as soon as the door slammed in the distance, “The name is Donald. Donald Ceerly.”

“Laven. This would be Rosette.”

Donald strained his neck to greet her, “Yes miss. It's a pleasure.”

That was an unexpected gesture from the old man. Everyone has gone out of their way to ignore Rosette’s existence since we first left the woods. Donald's eyes drifted back toward me, and he clearly noticed my reaction.

“Yes, you really don't understand anything at all do you?”
“I'd prefer if you didn't get any amusement out of that on account of me.”

“Such the talker too. Did you actually plan all that out with the Inquisitor?” Donald kept quiet for a moment to study me for a moment. I didn't get a chance to answer before he continued, “No, it looks like you didn't.” He became quiet again, losing himself deep in though, “So how is it that you're not dead?”

“I couldn't tell.”

“Couldn't or wouldn't?”

“More of the first than the second.”

Donald's back straightened out in his chair and a displeased expression set upon his face, “Listen here boy, I'm not here for you to get angry at. I'm also not going to put up with your whining or your bullshit. If you're looking for something to beat up, I'll have you fetch Marlow.”

“Just let me go on the record that I'm not playing some sort of mental chess game with anyone. I'm not looking to vent my anger on anyone. And if I was, I'm pretty sure I'd be justified since for a

couple days now everywhere I go people have tried to confine or kill me. So you'll have to forgive me for being a little pissed off. So why don't you just hurry up and come out with what you want?"

"You little-" Donald seemed ready to chastise me instead of back down, but before he could he went into a serious coughing fit. I reflexively stood up out of my chair, but his hand waved me back down.

He produced a red handkerchief, coughed into it a few more times, wiped his mouth and put it away. It was then that I noticed a very strange smell. I couldn't put my finger on it right away; when my eyes wandered onto Rosette she was also sniffing the air. I clearly wasn't imagining it.

"Blood." I said direly. Donald looked surprised; his expression didn't change much, but his eyes shifted from side to side. "You're coughing up blood." I drove the point home.

Donald sighed and slumped in his chair, "Yes, that's right."

"You're dying. Aren't you?"

"Stop." His voice was a little pained, not from physical aches that no doubt assailed him, but rather from the tinge of pity in my question. "Rosette." He said sullenly. "Can I speak with Laven alone? This needs to be between men and for him to hear only."

Rosette was unmoving; I'm sure she wasn't going to entertain that request at all. I confirmed it when I looked at her. Slowly she turned to return my glare.

I started to ask politely, "Rosette."

She cut me off quickly, "No. I said I wouldn't ever-"

"Rose." She stopped immediately. "He's harmless." She was still apprehensive. "It's his last request. You don't have to go far. Please?"

She cast her eyes down to the floor and sighed. She then marched her way to the door and closed it gently and softly behind her. I could hear her moving down the hallway; she didn't move very far at all; she took that one to heart. If I made a noise louder than polite speech, she'd no doubt hear. If the room was an ambush, all that pacing and nearly turning the room upside down over the last hour

would have uncovered that.

A sly expression spread over the old man's face, “As far as monsters go, that one puts many to shame. You're a lucky man. So? She fit like a glove? They somehow always know.”

I was taken aback. Donald kept leering at me with a well honed perverted gaze. I wasn't sure if he was joking or not. He had seemed really serious until a moment ago too. I had a hard time following what was going on his head.

“Don't look at me like that. I wanted to make sure the lady was absent before I started getting into the questions that mean anything.” He went into another minor coughing fit but soon continued. “You don't have to answer that one. It's written on your face right now. No wonder why that sick freak went after you.”

I mustered enough of my wits back to ask what I thought was a very important question, “Who exactly are you?”

“A very good question.”

“And how is it not written on your face?”

“Another good question. Here's mine. How did you not burn?”

“I told you I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“Holy water my boy. Not just the type made by any ordained priest. I heard what happened. That stuff was the real deal. Made to order on the sacred hill in the Golden Cathedral. If that stuff so much as touched another man in your position, they'd burst into flames and die on the spot. And not just die, but die for good. Soul and all. Terrifying stuff. That's the kind of death no normal person would wish on their worst enemy.”

“Some sort of tool for exorcisms?”

“Sadly, the Church has gone to a policy of zero tolerance. That's not how they deal with most people though.”

“Hanging?”

“All sorts of things. All of it to send one message. A man and a monster were not meant to be.” Donald's expression sunk at his own

words.

I had to goad him forward and have him continue, “So you're confessing that you're guilty?”

“And I'm guessing I am in good company.”

I kept quiet and didn't say a thing. Donald's eyes were very telling though. As sunken and dead as they looked, now that he felt free to talk as he wished, there was a spark of light in them I couldn't deny.

“Rosette the Thorn Knight. It's an infamous name. After every rumor you hear for the last few years, to think she'd settle down with someone as soft looking as you? Look here boy. That monster is regarded as an absolute terror. Able to cut a seasoned warrior in two with little effort. A raging inferno that incinerates everything in its path. It's rare that people fear more for their neck than their loins with a monster. So spare me your act of playing dumb. You didn't hire her to be your bodyguard. She's as good as a dozen knights, maybe more, all in one place. Just as expensive to hire too. They say the Thorn Knight is a nightmare on the battlefield but honorable and unable to lie. That said, she doesn't look at you like an employer. When her eyes are on you, they're way too soft for that.”

I leaned back in my chair and sighed, “Alright. I'll admit it. If it means we can move on. I met her not long ago. I fought her, and she was the one that did the deed.”

“The deed?” Donald thought on that for a moment before entering a laughing fit that turned into a minor coughing fit. “That scenario happens often too.” Once more his expression became sullen. It was as if his careless choice in words were bringing up unwelcome memories.

This time his eyes glazed over as he got lost in thought; I impatiently called him out, “Is this meeting all about trading stories? Or is there something you wanted?”

“I need your help.” I stayed quiet and let him continue, “You don't often find other men guilty of the greatest sin. Many of them run or are dragged off into the wilderness never to be seen again. Some of them stay hidden their whole lives. If they are not found and killed or run off themselves, most of them live in the demon realms.”

“Demon realms?”

“Areas controlled by monsters where they roam freely. They were once countries and cities ruled by men. Without the pressure of the church, one by one men fell victim to the advances of monsters until it collapses one day entirely. It becomes a land consumed with lust.”

“That would explain the vicious persecution. Is it really an over reaction? Demon realm makes it sound like a hell on earth.”

Donald's eyes turned deadly serious; they actually put me off for a second, and my heart sunk, “So you really don't know anything. It's hard to tell if you're joking or are ignorant.”

I sighed and tried to explain it the best I could, “A few days ago I woke up in a ditch. I found I don't quite remember where I am from, how to get back or even what my name is. I'm wandering now and looking for answers. My life feels like a puzzle. Not with pieces I have no idea where to place but with pieces missing completely. If I hadn't met Rosette, I'd probably still be lost in the forests near Brun where I would have died or been captured by monsters far worse than her.”

“So that's why you didn't turn her in when you reached Brun?”

“Because I owe her my life three times over.”

“Not for any other personal reason?” Donald asked with a perverted smile on his face. I could feel myself flush red; something he noticed right away and laughed at. “You could have done worse. Much worse.” He continued to read my expression, “Was it your first time too? Ha! I'd say it was. That's too bad, anything else is a disappointment afterwards! You can't go back to being normal after that kind of ride. Do you got scars from it?”

“You still haven't got to the point old man.” I was starting to lose my patience.

“Fine then.” He looked sour as I refused to join him in his fun. “I'll start over again. Who am I really? I am Donald Ceerly. The master tailor of Brun. I've made garments of silk worn by noble men and women from the west to east coasts. I put this town on the map. I'm the richest man in town with more power and influence than the mayor himself, but I owe everything to a monster. I'm dying Laven. I haven't got much time to live. I would journey to the forest all the time. 'Collecting materials for my work', I'd say. Everything I learned;

everything I made was all her." It seemed he was fighting back tears now. "I don't want to die here, Laven. If I'm going to die anywhere it would be back with her. With the woman I love."

It was a sad story, but there were some parts of it that didn't sit well, and I had to ask, "Why didn't you just live in the woods?"

"Because she wasn't the girl I married."

"Now you're not making any sense."

"I don't have the time to explain it all here. I know you're in a position close to mine. The inquisition can't touch you. Not right away. You're the only one I can trust. Not even my sons. I got favors to pull. I can make sure you get to the Free Ports safely."

"I think answering my question-"

"Can wait. I don't have all day to talk to you alone. Do you think I'm not taking any risk talking to you now? I may die soon on my own, but there're ways that can happen faster."

His eyes were a mixture of resignation, sorrow and desperation. I'm sure if I said no that would be the end of it. No one was going to stop me from leaving town, even if they tried. If I denied him, this sad old man would die comfortably in his bed very soon. If there was a hunt going on for people like me, there was no doubt Zerin or another psychopath would hound Rosette and me on our way south. I wasn't too keen on venturing back into the forests again, but if Rosette was close by, perhaps I wouldn't have to run the gauntlet of abuse and hardship again.

"All I got to do is make sure you get there?"
"Unless the man from the future can cure me right now."

Coughing up blood, the shortness of breath, his swaying to and fro from weakness and horrid stench of death; it had all the hallmarks of being cancer. I didn't have much doubt. He didn't have much time. If he kept his side of the bargain, we'd be able to make it to these 'Free Ports' without leaving a trail of blood along the way.

"No. Maybe in a different time and a different place I could have done something else. I'll get you to your woman."

Donald's expression brightened with renewed hope. "You have my gratitude, Laven. I also prepared lodging at the inn for you.

Don't worry, they've been well compensated to not give you any trouble. You can go now, Marlow will be sulking somewhere outside. Send him in and be on your way and get some rest. We'll leave late tomorrow morning."

"Late tomorrow morning? Aren't you in a hurry?"

There was a wry smile on his face that gave me chills, "No. You're gonna need the rest. I can tell." He laughed, topped off with another laughing fit.

I got out from my chair, walked over and offered my hand to seal the deal. He barely had the strength to shake, but he managed somehow. He still refused to wipe that look off his face. Even as I turned and left he couldn't stifle that laugh. I couldn't quite place it as him being happy things were going to go his way at the very end, or if he was in one some joke that I wasn't.

I left the room behind and saw Rosette standing guard down the hallway. She perked up, her non-ears, those fins on the side of her head, twitched and her head turned my way. She approached slowly, but half way she broke out into a lunge and threw herself at me, clinging to my chest and nearly knocking the wind out of me. She hung there for a moment, breathing in deeply. Her tail whipping back and forth, spewing out embers that fell everywhere.

She looked up at me with the most adorable face; she talked in a hushed voice, her characteristic energy and joviality had yet to return, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for-" No, I did know what she was talking about. "No, that's not your fault. I'm not hurt and neither are you nor anyone else. That's all I wanted."

She remained motionless for a moment, but then I felt her cheeks rub into my chest. Give me a break please. I'm not sure how much more of this I was going to handle. It was another uncharacteristic switch in personality too. I wasn't sure if my heart was going to handle it, even if my head said that she was just as likely to punch me in the gut and chastise me for not being able to take it.

She relented and looked up at me with eager eyes, "What did you talk about? What's going on?"

"W-we made a deal." I stuttered. "He wants to meet someone in the forest outside town. We get him there; and in return,

he gets us a safe passage to the Free Ports."

"Meet someone? Who? Who?" She seemed loaded with energy as she was almost jumping up and down.

"Some lover or mistress of his. I'm sure it's a monster."

She inhaled, and her expression brightened, "A secret meeting?" She was almost squealing. "How romantic! Forbidden love! And my first job with my husband. Also romantic!"

"He also got us a room at the inn to- whoa!" Rosette with incredible speed grabbed hold of one of my arms and began dragging me along.

"Let's go then! Hurry! hurry!"

"Wait a second! I can walk you know? We needed to buy supplies first anyway right? Right? Hold on!"

"Yes, we need to get ready too. Shopping with my husband! Shopping with my husband!" She was almost singing by now.

"Wait. What's gotten into you? Aren't you worried about being seen like this?" I think I was being ignored. "Has your brain stopped working? Hey! Come on. You looked so worried about appearances before."

"Don't care. My husband is invincible! I don't have to worry about anything anymore. Come on!"

"No! Wait. I can still break. My arm is going to come out of its socket. Come on!"

As I watched her from behind while she easily pulled me along, I noticed that tail of hers. The ridge of it burned bright, almost out of control. Had she not calmed down? Now that I thought of it, this kind of pattern of movement seemed rather familiar. I remembered what the old man Donald had said in his parting words, and I understood what he meant.

Chapter 12

For the better part of five hours my arm went through the worst hell it has experienced in its lifetime, pulled continuously around town by this impossibly strong girl. She was unable to contain her excitement; she visited market stall after market stall and store after store stockpiling an ever growing pile of goods. Food, blankets, pots and pans anything else you'd check off a to-do list for a camping trip. Donald had promised to arrange for us to be smuggled to the south coast; I wasn't sure what expenses were included in that trip, and I don't think the journey to Donald's final resting place was far enough away to plan for a month long excursion for a small army.

The amount of stuff she was just picking off the shelves worried me, but all she had to do was flash that guild card. Money didn't seem like a concern for this girl. If what she said before was true, everything would just be billed to the guild. Some vague concept she has raised a considerable amount of money for and also had no interest in explaining. All I knew was that money was raised by doing relentless mercenary work. I was also worried that she had dropped any pretenses of playing the calm, cool and collected sword for hire. She was openly affectionate, almost boastfully so. She was filled with glee and excitedly pointed toward various things and asked if it was alright that we got some of that and more of this. Maybe I was supposed to play the part of the level headed one, but it was her money or rather the guild's money, and I didn't feel it was my place to reign her in. It wasn't until I was lugging around one full and very heavy pack that I realized this had been the wrong course of action.

After a time, I was laden with two large rucksacks each the size of my torso. Despite all my hardships Rosette managed to carry twice that without even a hint of effort showing on her face. It was emasculating to say the least. My solace came when sun was setting, and the busy market would vanish along with it. Its heat had punished me all day, and I would be glad to finally be rid of it. The only thanks I could offer to the sun was that it got rid of that oil. Some of it evaporating or washing away as a layer of sweat replaced it. After several hours of shopping, I was rather surprised the whole excursion went off without a hitch. No one cried out, “Monster!” and ran for the hills. No Church thugs attempted to immolate me... Again... Not even one merchant slammed a door in our faces or pleaded that we leave. Money is money in the end. I'm sure there was only trouble for the person who dared try to get in the way of Rosette today. She was... overprotective... to say the least. Looking back on it, today had all the hallmarks of a date. There was little else you could have called it, but

instead of shoes her eyes sparkle at the sight of dried meat and weapons. If it wasn't obvious to me already it was driven home today. Rosette, at times, does act rather girly, yet she is definitely not an ordinary girl.

I found myself studying her smiling face on more than one occasion. I periodically almost forgot how we had met. Every time I came back to reality I felt a pang of fear in my heart. Not only because I remember what happened but because my emotions tied to remembering it are getting jumbled. If this is what they meant by Stockholm Syndrome, I could present a lecture on it by now. There was something hypnotic about the whiteness of her teeth, the glimmer in her eyes and jovial swaying of her hips as she bounced around the market. Even though my arm felt like it might be pulled from its socket because of the clawed arm she locked around my own, the pangs of fear slowly abated as the day went on... What the hell am I thinking? Am I sick? No healthy person would easily forget what happened. What she did. She can hide it behind that smile, but I still remember. There's no way she's going to fool me with that smile.

While I was simmering, Rosette finally relented as the day came to its end. I was dragged to the inn where lodging had been prepared for the two of us. The innkeeper was an older man, short and stocky; he was accompanied by an old maid who appeared to be his wife. She sat in the corner behind the reception desk repairing white sheets with a needle and thread. I could feel how frightened the old man was; his wife, however, seemed no worse for wear. Her milky white eyes told me she had already long since gone blind. Besides those two and ourselves, the inn was completely deserted. Row upon row of keys for each room still hung behind the desk. All untouched and complete with traces of dust.

The Inquisition had set up shop for some time; those that had nowhere to go stayed; everyone else got the hell out of Dodge. The air around town was still reserved; people avoided sites which had been the location of other executions. Fear was still looming in the air, and I shied away from thinking how much Donald had bribed the old couple to put up with a monster and the man accused of 'laying with her'. They were probably caught somewhere in the middle between being thankful for our shenanigans that dislodged the Inquisition and still fearful of the monster that was staying under their roof. A monster who the church took great pains to paint as, well, a monster.

I was distraught when the old man with a shaky hand extended a key towards us. First, because his fear was palatable, and I felt sorry

for him; he was probably running out of money and couldn't refuse. Second, it was for only one room. I cursed Donald under my breath. Rosette quickly freed one of her claws, reached out and snagged the key before I could protest. She beamed the old man a bright toothy smile. I think she almost gave him a heart attack with that, and he retreated back behind the counter in terror. I suppose that was to be expected. Her teeth looked human, but the ridges of each were razor sharp like a carnivore. If sunk into flesh, Rosette possessed the ability to tear someone apart. If monsters were creatures that preyed on humans, it wouldn't be so far fetched either to think they might just eat humans whole, and that maw wasn't helping to convince people otherwise. The old man had retreated and asking him to arrange two separate rooms was a long gone possibility. I was then spirited away when her free claw grabbed me by my shirt collar, and she whisked me away up the stairs.

Rosette had seemed very intent on not rocking any boats with exaggerated public displays of affection, but that charade seemed to have ended. The slightest hint of suspicion had a man and his cronies itching to off me. The whole meeting had been so casual, as though my death would be just any old thing they had to do that morning. After surviving their most powerful and dreaded tool at their disposal, Rosette had seemed to slowly ease back into her usual self. Especially when she so casually mentioned how glad she was that I was 'invincible'. All the cuts, bruises and perhaps even minute bone fractures I was carrying around from my jaunt through the woods told a different story. If I had not inadvertently agitated Zerin, I may have met my death by a more conventional and down to earth method.

Far down the hallway, at the very end, through a pair of double doors, Rosette pushed our way through into our room. They rebounded back closing with an ominous slam and click. Thankfully, she finally let go of my shirt collar and dropped the various bags she had been carrying with her along the floor as she skipped toward the pair of two beds. I was immediately relieved at seeing two of them. I joined Rosette in letting the two rucksacks slide off my shoulders and hit the floor with a thud. By then Rosette had already leaped onto one of the beds and started to roll about giggling and sprawling atop it. Maybe this was a luxury she often didn't treat herself to? Given the reception and hospitality around here, it wouldn't be so surprising she'd avoid towns unless necessary.

Oblivious to my observing her, Rosette rummaged through one of the bags and began to shovel handfuls of smoked beef into her mouth. She savagely ripped and tore into them with her sharp teeth.

The way she smiled ear to... fin to fin; she was obviously enjoying herself. Perhaps beef jerky, or any other smoked meat for that matter, was her favorite food. She was so engrossed that I dared not bother her. The other bed was so inviting; but now that I had stopped and stood still for so long in one place, I was still covered by a day's worth of sweat, dirt and grime. I didn't quite get how Rosette managed to stay so clean herself. I never noticed her sweat. Perhaps she didn't, or rather she didn't have to. She seemed capable of adjusting to any temperature. Maybe she didn't have a single sweat gland in her entire body? She noticed I was staring at her, and I quickly looked away in a panic and pretended to be distracted by something, anything, elsewhere.

The room itself was rather spacious; it was clear this was the VIP room of the inn. It already put the size of my apartment to shame. It was at least six by six meters of space, complete with two double beds, a table and chair for an eating area and an assortment of other chairs and couches arranged into small reading area. From behind the windows, obscured by a pair of shutters, the red dusk sunlight poured in. Another doorway stood halfway to the far wall which revealed a bathroom, once again its size put my own to shame. I imagine it would be among the most luxurious amenities in this world. A fresh chamberpot underneath a well crafted wooden chair, a tall bathtub forged from bronze and a setup with a bucket elevated up high with a faucet in the bottom that looked like some type of shower.

I could still hear Rosette tearing and chewing away back in the other room, so I closed the door behind me and got undressed. I took a much closer look at the various gashes, scraps, cuts and scabs covering my body. Putting my hands on the counter before a large bathroom mirror, I gazed into it. There I saw a face looking back at me which had been spared most the beating that had pushed my body to its limit. Bags under my eyes, scruffy and messy brown hair that had been tossed into a matter mess on top my head and rough unshaven stubble had started to set in. That face looking back at me looked like a mess. Tin containers full of water were lined up along the wall. I indulged myself by pouring a good deal into the basin below the mirror and rinsing vigorously. My face looked ten years younger for doing so as the grime washed away. I eyed the bronze tub and the shower next, and I didn't have any second thoughts. I emptied canister after canister of the water into the tub, lit a miniature stove beneath it and made my way to the shower.

A cascade of cold water fell down onto me, and I almost regretted my decision. A warm shower was a luxury from home I would

most likely have to do without. Still, the water although cold was clean; and as it soaked my head, I was able to force my fingers through my own hair once again. Clear water turned grey and brown as it swirled round and round the drain at my feet. The cold water also washed and stung my various injuries. It was a welcome feeling though. I felt as though the ordeal of the last few days were being slowly washed away. I eventually closed my eyes, held my face toward the stream of water and let it flow over me; my open palms at my hips pointing toward the heavens as if I was praying to rain.

All I could hear was the water pounding on my skull, so I did not notice the ambush coming from behind. Wrapping under my arms were a pair of red scaled forearms and claws crossed over my chest. Those scaly palms rested on my chest, and a body was pulled toward them. Two large fleshy mounds squeezed themselves onto my back each crowned with a hard fleshy nub. Lastly, I felt the soft smooth skin of a cheek rest on my shoulder. I completely froze, and my body became rigid and tense. I stood by as I felt the sharp tipped claws drag across my chest; the fingertips stopping at each wound before moving on.

“R-Rosette?” I called out in a shaky voice.

There wasn't an answer, but there was no way these arms and claws could belong to anyone else. Neither had I seen another with a similar bust size currently pressed up against my back. Any doubt was washed away when the sensation of cold water started to disappear as her body heat started to heat the cold water at an alarming rate. Those claws of hers eventually retreated from my chest and eventually clung to my shoulders. Rosette was still leaning her weight on me. Despite the strength she could throw around, it always confounded me how little she weighed. She was definitely still a woman and smaller than me. My heart was losing all control and beating wildly.

A small voice, meek sounding, called me from behind, “I'm sorry.”

“I-” My voice cracked, forcing me to scramble to regain my composure, “I told you not to be.”

“Why not? You got in trouble because of me. I knew it could happen too.”

That foreknowledge bit is a revelation. I wasn't sure exactly what she meant, but I didn't feel any different after hearing it.

“No, really. If anyone should be sorry shouldn't it me? I mean, I stopped you from fighting, you really wanted to. I could tell.” I shrugged my shoulders, “I didn't want to risk getting hurt. That goes for you or anyone else around. Also, if you attacked them, wouldn't you lose your guild membership? That was probably part of their plan. I didn't want that to happen because of me.”

I got ahead of myself and turned around to face her; putting my hands on her shoulders I held her still and looked right at her. She looked up at me, intently listening. Those amber crocodile eyes looked very moist, and I don't think it was just because of the shower still cascading down off our heads.

“I got greedy and wanted everything to go my way. So don't blame yourself for it at all. There's a good chance if you hadn't come along I'd be still lost in the woods, dead or worse. I can't be anything but thankful even after that, well, incident.”

From her melancholic and intently listening face, her expression lightened up, and her signature smile slowly returned along with her color. I suddenly noticed the embarrassing words coming out of my mouth and the fact we were both facing each other, almost touching and embracing, and became flustered immediately.

“T-that is to say. I-I still don't approve of all your actions. You c-clearly did not make a good first impression. I'm still mad about that. Don't think I just approve of everything you do!” I could barely backpedal fast enough, and I was tripping over my own tongue attempting to do so.

That last bit seemed to have entered one fin and left the other. She just stood there with that stupid smile on her face with her eyes closed. Her claws hanging at her side. Her dark red hair wet, not tied up and hanging down to her buttocks. Then her grin receded, and her face came closer to mine; her lips slightly pursed. On her claw like feet, she was on her 'toes' and pushing ever closer. I looked to the right and left instinctively like a cornered animal looking for an escape. I felt myself heating up. I was in such close proximity with Rosette; and now that I looked right at it her tail, there was a fire slowly building and fanning into a blazing inferno.

I reached critical mass and skirted around her outside along the shower booth's wall. Still burning hot, I cooled myself off by jumping into the nearby bathtub. It was still halfway between polar and tepid, but I felt like I had left a sauna and jumped into a snowbank. The

shock to my system snapped me back to my senses, at least for long enough to realize the mistake I had probably made.

Before I had another moment to think, there was a blur and a splash. A weight was on me. The rims of the tub became a waterfall as its contents were displaced by about another fifty kilograms or so. I found myself staring at someone's back and head. Rosette had seated herself between my legs. Hanging off to the side and draped over the side of the tub was Rosette's tail which was still burning even though most of it was still underwater. With her back leaning against my chest, it was still partially in the way and I could feel it twitch and whip back and forth every so often.

Kicking her clawed feet up on the rim of the bathtub, interlocking her clawed fingers, stretching them outward with an audible crack and stretching her shoulders with a groaning sigh, she pushed her weight onto me further. Afterwards she giggled and leaned her head back to rest against my chest. Once again, the scent of campfire, the smell of burning cedar, wafted upwards. Steam had started to rise from the surface of the water. Something else was also starting to rise.

I noticed my hands, which had been gripped on the sides of the bathtub had risen and suspended themselves into the air. It was if they had taken on a mind of their own and were pleading in forgiveness, "I'm not touching! I'm not touching!" It was then that I felt they had been seized in Rosette's claws, and she drew them in. She crossed her own arms and mine from one of her shoulders to the other, embracing her. Something she immediately moaned, squirmed and ground herself further backwards into me over.

By now I had completely frozen. I dared not move a muscle least something pop out somewhere. I slowly drew my arms back until they rested on each of her shoulders. I was about to push her away to save my own sanity when I squeezed a little hard and the most peculiar moan came out from her mouth. It was laced with ecstasy, and it put me completely off my game and wrecked havoc with my head.

She was breathing heavily now, "Laven. Do that again." I was still stunned when she repeated herself, almost begging, "Hey. Hey! Do it again." It was when she spoke again for the third time I broke, "Please."

That accursed word, I couldn't help but oblige. I gripped both

her shoulders in my hands and slowly started to dig my thumbs into the back of her shoulder and roll the muscles there. Rosette was tense at first, but she quickly went loose as I worked away at her shoulders and back of her neck with a massage. I was once again reminded just how small and feminine she was. My own hands were quite large compared to her shoulders, but the muscles behind that tan skin were definitely more taut, and there wasn't much body fat present. It was almost just bone and muscle. Each time I dug my thumbs in she squirmed and moaned in ecstasy. Eventually, she started arching her back every so often when I got a little rough and upped the pressure. The water temperature had been steadily increasing all this time, and I had started sweating.

After a few minutes, my hands started to get rather tired, and I began to slow down. Suddenly, Rosette pulled back and turned herself around in the tub and faced me. Sitting on her knees still tucked between my legs, she looked at me with a dangerous look in her eyes. I gulped involuntarily.

“Laven.” She cooed.

“Y-yes?” I replied nervously.

“I want you to massage something else.” She said coquettishly.

I didn't even get a chance to ask when she slowly, but firmly, grabbed hold of my right hand and brought it to her left breast. I felt her nipple rest between my middle and ring finger, and my hand sank into the flesh. My hand seized up in shock and clenched on its own. My fingers sank deeper into the fatty tissue. I couldn't even hold it all my hand, and they hung there in front of my face, hanging, firm, defying gravity. I didn't know what I was doing anymore when my other hand reached and obliged Rosette by cupping her other breast in my left hand. In my right hand, I could feel a distinct heart beat, it was thumping away violently. Rosette repositioned herself in front of me, pushing closer to me; she sat down on her shins which she used to trap my right leg. I felt something distinct on my thigh; and as my hands clenched, pushed, pulled and rotated on their own, she started to push her hips forward and back, rubbing her groin against my leg.

Her breaths had become hot and heavy, so hot and heavy that I also noticed something else that was going on. The water in the bathtub had started bubbling! I hadn't felt any pain, but I noticed my own skin started turning red like a lobster boiling away in a pot. I

immediately panicked and tried to pull back. I stood up and almost fell over backwards out of the tub. But I wasn't fast enough. Two claws wrapped around my legs and pulled me back. I was now sitting on edge of the tub, my legs still in the water and Rosette looking up at me with dangerous eyes and a flirtatious smile. Those claws clinging to my legs, the talons almost piecing flesh wrapped around and held my legs together, holding me securely in place. With only frictionless surfaces to push off I was not able to squirm away. Rosette's eyes drifted downward to my crotch; there, having emergency blown to the surface, was my erect cock.

I started to plead right away, “Rosette. Rosette please. Control yourself.”

“I've always wanted to do this.” Rosette was completely gone. She wasn't talking to me anymore, “My friend told me her husband really liked it when she did it.”

“Rosette.” I mustered the most serious tone I could. “Please listen. Don't play around-”

I watched as Rosette's tongue unfurled out of her mouth and approached my member. Her tongue was at least seven centimeters longer than an average human's. I could feel the breath through her nostrils as she approached, and her face suspended itself right next to it. She then tentatively brought her tongue to my shaft and slowly dragged it along my underside to it's base. I felt a shiver start from my hips and spread. A reaction that she seemed to notice and spurred her onwards. She pulled back and licked my throbbing glans which hit me with a burst of pleasure from my hips twice that of before. When her tongue ran along the underside of the glan's ridge I let out a moan I couldn't stifle. It was a sign she immediately took advantage of, and her tongue dextrously curled itself around. My mind went blank and my vision white for a very brief moment.

Her tongue prodded and licked away. It slipped and slid across my shaft to my head and back again. It was very slow and methodical, gentle and curious. There was a little apprehension that she wasn't able to hide. I had long since thrown my head back; but when I looked back down again after feeling her tongue retreat, I noticed her right clawed hand, talons and all, wrapped around the base. She had stopped holding me down, but with those razor sharp talons I dared not jostle and pull back, lest I regret it by making a bloody mess.

In her claw, she tightened her grip and let go multiple times;

every so often she looked up at me to see the look on my face before focusing her attention back to the matter at hand.

“Is this how you do it?” She looked up and asked me.

“Do what?” I asked between breaths.

“My friend said men do this kind of thing all the time. But she said her husband likes it a lot when she does it.”

I wasn't thinking straight so I responded honestly, “Masturbate? That's when you grip tightly and stroke- whoa!”

She didn't even wait for me to finish as she immediately began to run her claw up and down the shaft, increasing in speed steadily. In one corner of my head, I was terrified of those talons tearing me to pieces down there, but from the other corner was the rush of pleasure radiating outward from my loins. From the palm of her claw, there was a body heat seeping in that was spreading throughout my body and numbing me. It was just like last time and the many other times she kept continuous skin contact. Except this time, it was many times more potent.

By now I had lost track of how long I had been on the receiving end, but suddenly Rosette stopped altogether. I looked down to see her claw still clasped around the base of my shaft, but she was looking closely at the tip where I had started to leak precum. I was on the verge of getting my grip on reality back and getting her to stop when she licked it off. It was then there was an almost frightening change in her. I could feel her hot breath tickle me down below; she licked the head, but quickly progressed to pursing her lips together and kissing it until; almost on instinct, she wrapped her lips around it and took it into her mouth. The change in temperature fried my senses. Inside her mouth I felt that tongue of hers wrap around me. Her hand began pumping up and down again at the base of the shaft, and her head began to bob back and forth. I felt slight pricks along my penis as my brain told me that she was lightly grating it along her razor sharp teeth. Had I been of better mind, I may have panicked, but I had long since passed the point of no return.

With one claw wrapped at the base, the other claw clasped over the first claw, her lips and teeth sliding back and forth over the glans and the rest of the shaft and her tongue coiling and prodding, I felt as though I was quickly reaching a climax. Muscles in my buttocks were kicking in and on instinct thrust back and forth following the

motions Rosette was moving in. She too had long since been lost to reason. As I was reaching my limits, I felt her take my cock ever further as I started to reach the back of her throat. She released the shaft from her grip, rested her claws on my hips and began taking it in all they way down her throat. Losing my own mind, I grabbed the sides of her head and took locks of her long red hair in my hands. In a single explosion, I released what had pent up till that moment.

Rosette gave a gagged yelp of surprise as I painted the back of her throat white, pulse after pulse of powerful and sweet muscle contractions in my lower body fired off again and again as my head went blank, and my vision whited out. After more than twenty seconds, I finally felt spent. My hands lost their strength and let Rosette go. She pulled back, my legs gave out and I slid back into the tub between her legs. I felt exhausted, but I looked at Rosette still kneeling there. She tilted her head back and, with a gulp, swallowed. There was a satisfied look of ecstasy on her face as she looked at me, but her eyes were still as dangerous as before.

It was me who came to my senses first. I had been completely oblivious, but I soon noticed that the nearly full bathtub was now completely devoid of any water. A cloud of steam hung in the room; every drop that had been there before had evaporated. If a nearby window had not existed or had not been open, the room very well may have become an actual sauna.

What had happened before was happening all over again. I slipped out of the tub; this time Rosette was either too out of it or didn't want to try and stop me. Every drop of water and sweat on me had been blasted off by the heat radiating from Rosette. I stumbled over the dry bathroom floor, through the door from the bathroom and saw the two beds in the main room had been pulled together into a single larger bed. Rosette had planned this all out in advance.

I turned around to see Rosette had appeared naked right behind me. I backed away from her with each step she took. There was no way I could get away from her. Nor could I move backwards fast enough. She was sticking right to me the whole way, looking up at me with a flushed expression. Lecherous predator like eyes and a sexy smile stabbed into my heart. Her tail whipped behind her, embers thrown off with each flick and they scattered and danced in the air floating to the floor. I only remember seeing these flames burn so brightly twice before. When she pushed herself on me the very first time, and the time she fought that Amazon on the river bed. The back of my knees hit something. It was soft, but I had run into the bed. It

was then that Rosette leaped at me, twisted around and pulled me down on top of her.

So there I was, my hands holding me up, Rosette half on the bed, her legs resting on the floor, I was standing and hanging over her. Her claws were grasping my shoulders tightly, her hair was spread out over the bed cover, and she was looking up at me with an inviting gaze. There was no pulling back; slowly, surely, she pulled me in; my face was approaching closer to hers. All my strength wasn't enough; it only slowed her down. I was on a collision course. The closer I got to her the more heat I felt. The more heat I felt the more my reason broke down and the more my thoughts slowed. By the time my lips were hovering just above hers, my strength left me, and she closed the last bit of distance with a single tug, and I kissed her. Her long tongue aggressively lunged out as well and wrestled with my own.

I was locked in now; she backed up, moving her body up and onto the bed, and I followed. She lay there with her back on the bed, looking up at me on my hands and knees above her. Our lips separated, and we were both greedily breathing. Once again, she brought her own face toward mine lightning fast and kissed me again. She hung there for a moment, no tongue; she then pulled back and looked at me with those amber crocodile eyes of hers. I felt the palms of her claws caress each of my cheeks.

She got my attention and then said only three simple words, “Laven. I love you.”

In the meantime, I had gotten hard and ready again. There was a heat inside me that was trying to escape, particularly from one location. I was swollen, larger than normal. It hurt, and that heat was begging for release. Likewise, I had no control when I thrust forward, and I felt a warm, soft and wet embrace below. Rosette's back arched immediately on insertion, and her claws wrapped around and held tight to the back of my neck. I had no idea what was going on anymore; there was a heat in my body that had to let free. It cooked my senses and my reason. It drove my hips forward, forward further into Rosette. The closer I got to Rosette, the warmer I got and the cycle fed itself and escalated further and further. I had already cum and cum hard earlier, but that wasn't stopping me. I was incredibly sensitive; but even if it was so sensitive it felt like it hurt a little, I continued on. On her back, Rosette's own hips timed themselves with my own, and we rocked back and forth on the bed together. She held on tight, and I felt her legs cross over my back. She held onto me like I was the only thing holding her above some gaping chasm.

The beds creaked under the weight and the rough motions and rattled when I began to pick up speed. Rosette clung tighter, closer, giving off more heat, and to expend that heat I moved even faster. Rosette had started letting out short sweet moans, and they started escalating into long lewd ones. I felt my penis being constricted and pulled further inward. Muscles and membranes worked away at my cock in a way I hadn't imagined possible, edging me on. As I reached my limit to how fast I could rock forward and back, Rosette's breathing had become pants of ecstasy. I continued to plunge harder, plunging forward and deeper each time. I felt another being deep inside, wrapped around me, constricting, tugging, pulling, embracing softly, slick, sticky and wet. Rosette was approaching some limit as well. Her talons scratched my skin and dug in painfully, but it wasn't a pain that could stand up to a pleasure that was building. Even when she reached up with her teeth and sunk them into my shoulder I continued on. All of it only goaded me to a final goal.

A final stage had been reached, I had reached a critical speed, I felt myself break past a limit and I heard Rosette's breathing and moans do the same. With a few final deep thrusts, I pushed past the final limit, thrust myself as fast as I could, and for the second time I let loose inside her. My loins poured forth into Rosette, and she clung to me, receiving all of it. Convulsion after convulsion, I felt with each additional thrust; each one weaker and more pathetic than the last, a great deal of heat escape from my body. I gritted my teeth and groaned; Rosette's back arched; her body convulsed just like mine and literally screamed in ecstasy. Finally, Rosette's grip on me loosened, and with my strength sapped I fell on top of her. I rolled off to the side, easing my weight off of her chest which had been heaving up and down desperate for air. I too lay there desperately looking for air. After being joined for so long, I felt separated and isolated, but that was soon banished when a petite and female form rolled over and nestled itself beside me. I felt a large pair of soft but firm breasts press up against my chest; smooth silky thighs and abdomen rubbed against me, and scaly claws rubbed up against my lower legs. I turned to look at the face beside me. The face of a woman, a beautiful one at that, eyes closed, a mouth smiling drifting off to sleep.

Sleep was overcoming me as well. There was a heat beside me, seeping out from her to me, but there was also the cold night air from the window. The sun had long ago set; there was no city lights like I was used to, but there was candle light all around. Also, fire light, lots of it. Not just from behind Rosette's back where her tail laid at rest. But from the bed covers. The curtain. A few of the chairs. A decorative

painting or two. All of them were smouldering; each belched black smoke as well. I was almost passed out myself. A sane part of my brain cried out that maybe it was smoke inhalation or carbon monoxide. My rational brain also saw the embers from Rosette's tail and put two and two together.

I poked Rosette's cheek a couple of times, “Rosette, the room is on fire.” She scrunched her face and groaned, but there was no response. “Rose.” I said. “Rose the room is on fire.” I said lazily in a monotone.

She tossed and turned in her sleep again. But the fires around the room all died at once. There was some smoke left, but it was pushed out with the gusts of wind from the window. There was damage everywhere, but I hadn't the energy to care or sympathize. I only hoped the old couple had been well compensated in advance. After tossing and turning for a moment, she pulled herself even closer to me and buried her face in my shoulder, and her breathing became calm, rhythmic. I too then drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 13

No sooner than I had passed out I awoke from a dreamless sleep. It was a disorientating lapse in time, but I could tell that I was feeling a distinct lack of oxygen in my brain. Breathing had become difficult. I sounded like an old man with a tracheotomy and a bad case of the black lung. My eyes adjusted to the morning light, at least one eye. Half my vision was completely blacked out by something large and fleshy pressing against the side of my face and something scaly rubbing against my throat. I shook involuntarily after finally waking up and nearly entered a panic after doing so.

My hands instinctively reached up to the arm wrapped around me, but even all my strength couldn't budge it at all. My reflexes became despondent and relented shortly after I strained my arms to their limit. Dejected at its failure, my mind was able to catch up and figure out what the problem was. Last night Rosette had suddenly attacked me, cornered me on the bed, locked me in, we had sex and during the night she turned in her sleep and put me in a headlock. Thanks brain, it's nice you're always there when I need you most.

While congratulating myself I came to another conclusion; my problem had yet to be solved. The lack of oxygen to my brain had obviously started to do funny things to my train of thought, and the oncoming near death experience only served to make me more sensitive to stimuli. The soft breast pressing against the side of my head felt nice, and time slowed down enough so I could enjoy the feeling even more. The crisis started getting worse when my brain, after expending itself already, let panic take hold again. I tried to get my hands under the red, thick and armor like scales on her forearm, even if I could pull it back just a little, one good gulp of air and I'd be back on track to remaining in the land of the living.

Once again, my struggling and flailing ended in failure, and my hands searched around desperately for something to grab hold of. Eventually, my right hand got one good handful of soft flesh and gave it one panicky squeeze which was returned with a sweet moan. The body pressed up against mine finally stirred and let loose a feminine yawn.

“Oh Laven, so early in the morning.” Rosette cooed.

I responded with guttural noises. I could almost see her tilting her head side to side in puzzlement like a dog. Instead, she interpreted my dire plight to save my life for being frisky. This caused her only to

hug me closer. My ability to breath was completely cut off. I felt her cheek rest on the top of my head and rub back and forth affectionately as she hummed to herself gaily. I was slamming my open palm onto the bed sheet now, trying to put it through her thick skull that I was tapping out. Almost as if she moved by instinct I felt the death grip loosen immediately, and I was relieved with one giant gasp of air. My back also shot upwards, sitting myself straight up choking and hacking.

I wasn't granted any respite; immediately her weight fell on my back and pushed down on my side where she wrapped herself around me like I was a living body pillow. Arms locked at my sides, one leg slid between mine and wrapped around. I couldn't move at all, but at least I could breathe. There was also the patter of something slapping against the bed covers, her tail wagging back and forth in excitement. Even in such close contact with so much of my body all at once there wasn't the same heat as there was last night. Even with both of us still naked like this, she nor I showed any reaction. Thankfully, there was no fuel to add to that fire.

With my life no longer in danger, I soon remembered that today was a very important day. The old man Donald offered us free passage to some vague safe place Rosette had explained to me. A safe haven in the south called the Free Ports. I would be stupid to think after yesterday's stunt that I had seen the last of the radical and extreme parts of some unknown religious institution no doubt after my head for some infraction against their core beliefs. It was too late for reconciliation, and you may call me crazy, but I thought I was safer with the violent, clingy and crazy lizard-girl than a bunch of religious fanatics.

“Rosette?” I called out to her rather irritated. It wasn't intentional, just a little leftover grudge from nearly being choked to death. “Rosette?” I called out for the second time, this time nicer but still without a response. “Rose,” The third one was almost a sigh.

“Yes?” Her response was instantaneous and chipper.

“Don't we have to be somewhere?”

“If you don't know what you're taking about, why would you ask?”

“I was being sarcastic.”

“Shark casting? What's that?” she said genuinely puzzled

That one made my head hurt. There were times when a genuine cunning shone in her eyes which was soon betrayed by crushing stupidity when she opened her mouth. Even now I wasn't quite sure just how deep a hole she could dig herself. I was getting the impression this girl's brain was completely unable to comprehend prose, and everything was taken at face value and literally. If I wasn't careful with my words I might put myself in a dangerous situation. Maybe if I was lucky only another headache would result.

Rosette's body tensed up, and she gave a yelp of dismay. She finally let go of her vice like embrace and rolled off the bed

“We have a job to do today!” She cried out as she began rummaging around the mess around the room.

“That's what I was-” A wad of cloth slammed into my face, enough for it to hurt somehow.

“Hurry Laven! Hurry!”

I pulled the cloth away and gave it as shake to reveal a pair of my boxers. At least most of a pair of boxers. It smelled burnt and there were large areas that had completely burned away. It then tore into two having been only been held together by the weakest of threads. I gave another sigh and sat up on the edge of the bed. Parts of the room and some of our belongings had been lit on fire last night; not only were we going to be late, but we'd have to take inventory.

I watched as Rosette turned some bags upside down and inside-out until she finally found the pairs of underwear she was looking for. Silk and dyed black thong. Neither frilly or suggestive; a rather utilitarian design. The back pulled up right below the base of her tail which swished back and forth as usual. I watched from behind as she slipped those claws and legs through each hole and rode them up to her waist and let them snap to her form. That slap caused me to twitch and come back to my senses. My eyes unfocused and refocused to see her slipping on a black string bikini top, cupping her breasts into- No! No no no no. Calm down.

I looked away, closed my eyes in a flustered panic and took deep breaths to calm my beating heart. I lightly slapped my cheeks in my hands to steel myself. Get a grip; we gotta get moving. Just ignore her and carry on. I distracted myself by finding spare parts of my own clothing and slipped them on. I was done much quicker than her; she was still tying on pieces of armour to her shoulders, arms, waist and

hips. I studied her choice of dress, and my face must have been cockeyed because when she felt a gaze on her she turned around and noticed me and gave me a grin.

“Are you enjoying the view husband?” She teased shaking her hips which was accented by the clatter of her freshly donned armour clacking together.

I decided to ignore the last bit, “I was wondering why a warrior would wear so little armour. You look like you're ready to go to the beach, not fight.”

She actually had to pinch her chin in her thumb and pointer fingers and hum while she thought about what I said. She finally had some sort of epiphany at what I was getting at, “Why don't you see why yourself?” Spreading her feet and claws shoulder width apart, she held onto her hips, elbows out, and stuck her chest out. She remained motionless for some time before asking, “Aren't you gonna do it?”

“Do what?”

“Come on, hit me. Right in the stomach.” She patted her abdomen with her palm. “Come on.”

I hesitated and tried to talk, but only my lips moved mouthing off an inaudible, 'what the fuck?'

“Come on. I bet ya it won't hurt.”

She then turned to her right and reached for a nearby chair and tore one of the legs off. I was somehow not even surprised anymore this girl would do something so outrageous. I must be breaking. She tossed it at me, and I caught it one hand.

“I'll give ya a-. A- What was it?”

“A handicap?”

“Yeah! A handy cat!”

I ground my teeth and swallowed a scream. She's trying to prove a point, focus on that and humor her. Just do it and get it over with. Take your frustration out. I walked over and wound up the makeshift baseball bat over my shoulder and slammed it as hard as I could against her stomach. She didn't even flinch. She didn't budge or grimace either. The chair leg snapped on impact, and I watched as the

splinters exploded from the point of impact. It felt like I had hit concrete, and my hands writhed in pain.

“Fucking hell.” I dropped the chair leg and massaged my right palm with my thumb trying to get the kink out of it after taking the shocking reverberation that had run up the piece of wood and into my arms.

Rosette laughed heartily, “I barely felt that at all. I'm already tough and wearing armor would just get in the way!”

She reached out suddenly with her right claw and grasped me by the back of the head. I felt her talons dig in a bit; it hurt like hell. She then pulled me down and shoved my face into her navel. Pressing the side of my head there and holding it. I tried to struggle, but there wasn't a hope of pulling away. Eventually I gave up, I tried to figure out what her game was, but when I relaxed I felt the softness of her skin, but there was a rock hardness beneath that layer of tanned skin and the thinnest almost nonexistent layer of fat. And so I sat there on my knees, unable to move, and Rosette seemed to have zoned out once again. Until her stomach gurgled almost loud enough to deafen me.

With a loud, “ah!” she ran off to find more dried meat to devour. That left me still kneeling on the floor a little dazed and confused.

This morning had been a whirlwind, and I still wasn't able to connect all the dots between last night and now. Just what was I doing? What was I supposed to be doing? Just what kind of position did I find myself in? I felt like I was prisoner in a cell, but the world outside was far too cruel and dangerous, and the warden seemed like the least of all evils I had laid my eyes upon. She was still an evil though, so a voice in the back of my head kept trying to remind me. 'She's vicious. She's violent. She's callous, rude and abrupt.' Somewhere on the other side of my brain spoke a different tale, 'She saved your life. She is selfless, brave and beautiful. Also in love. With you, if you didn't notice. Dumbass.'

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and tried to banish my thoughts. On instinct, I turned around and saw something flying toward me out of the corner of my eye and caught something heavy and cold. Then a second flew at me then a third and a forth.

“Happy birthday!” Rosette called out excitedly. I was wide eyed, breathless and confused. “Well, maybe it isn't. Probably not.

When else would you give someone a present?" She actually got lost in thought trying to answer her own rhetorical question. I was going to say something when she suddenly continued, "When you took a breather yesterday I snuck off quick and got them as a surprise."

I looked down and saw they were a pair of leather boots and gloves inside iron vambraces and shinguards.

"That will stop all the bruising you've been gettin'." She cried out, "oh!" and continued rummaging inside one of the larger bags. "Put your hands out." I didn't even have a chance to say anything when she turned around and stomped her way toward me; I raised my hands out of fear. She pushed something to my chest, a brown shirt. Rather, it was a leather jerkin. She held one sleeve and held it against my arm and measured it; seeing it fit perfectly she smiled and gave a little, "yes!" and a fist pump. She handed it to me, "Put it on! Quick! Quick!"

A little overwhelmed I slipped it on and hastily tied up the front to secure it. It felt a little bulky and heavy, but I was thankful for that; immediately after I put it on Rosette punched me in the chest, hard. I didn't see it coming, and it put me off my feet, and I took a few rogue footsteps backwards and fell backwards onto the bed. I tried to breath, but the force of it winded me.

"You alright? You're okay right?" She extended a claw that I grabbed on reflex, and she pulled me back to my feet. She then slapped my chest with her palm and observed my face. Satisfied that I was only gasping for air and not wincing in pain; she gave another smile as if she was so very satisfied with herself. "See? See? You'll be fine."

Was she showing concern? I think she was trying to show concern for me, but she certainly was enjoying herself at the same time while I was not.

"Come on! Get ready. We need to get going." She was so cheerful she was humming as she gathered her things into a single bag.

I suppose we wouldn't be taking it all with us. We'd have to come back before we left again. I wasn't looking forward to it. When the owners of this inn saw the state of this room, the awkward glare from that old man would be hard to cope with. I slipped on and pulled the tall leather boots up over my jeans and pulled the gauntlets and vambraces over my arms. Steel covering my toes and shins, I moved

my fingers and watched the jointed metal pieces flex and conform to my fingers. It was well crafted. Just how much money did this girl have to throw around without a care in the world?

"I wanted to do something special for you, but it's the wrong season." She said uncharacteristically fidgeting on the spot. "I mean- I." Now she was also flushed, a deep red across her cheeks. "I wanted to give you something more personal."

"Whoa whoa, wait. Slow down-"

Rosette slid her talons across the armor on her hips and moved them up to the red scales that she wore over the cups of her black bikini top. "Something more intimate, so we could always be real close."

That's when it dawned on me, "You use your own scales for your armor?"

Now she was a deep red, "Every winter- No! I mean yes! I mean we're married and I- I want to do that for you!" She pounded her own stomach with her fist. "It would be like I'm protecting you all the time. I'm real tough! You'd never get hurt more than I do. Even if I do cause a lot of trouble. Even if I'm not a good wife because I like to fight a lot. I feel much stronger. Stronger than ever because of you. And I want you to be stronger too! So that no matter what we fight, we can fight it together, and we'll never lose!"

I tried to stay cool and collected against the waves of euphoria she was gushing, "Rose," I said, finally calling out to her.

She immediately stopped what she was doing and slowly turned her to face me. I was taken aback when I saw her eyes were watering a little...

"Whoa whoa whoa!" I hurriedly said, "I just wanted to say thank you! You don't have to-"

Her voice was meek but it stopped me immediately, "You called me Rose."

"Erk," The words in my throat backed up, piled onto each other and train wrecked. I hadn't even noticed. I didn't have the opportunity to cover my ass and play it off.

She leaped up and tackled me head on; her head butted me in

the chest and knocked me flat onto the floor. I hit my back, which was conveniently cushioned this time by the jerkin, and Rose was rubbing her cheek affectionately against my chest and looked up at me with fluttering eyelashes.

“I was just-”

“Only my close friends call me Rose. You always call me Rosette first. But this time you said Rose!”

“Rose, we need to get going- ack!”

That was a bad choice; in the heat of my moment she clung onto me even tighter, and she was getting hotter and hotter; the flame on her tail getting larger and larger; it looked like it would spit embers again at any moment.

“Wait!” I cried out, “We need to get going! We're gonna be late!” I was desperate, if I didn't reel her in it would get bad very soon.

She sat up suddenly, still resting her hips on top of me, “You're right. Our first job together!”

Rose. Rosette... Fuck it. Rose grabbed onto my hand and pulled my still limp body to my feet. With her other claw, she thrust my bag into my chest which I received but no sooner was yanked again when she grabbed hers and threw open the door nearly running through the hall, down the stairs and out of the inn.

This situation had become all too common. My arm hurt, my feet kept slipping and could barely get a grip and I had no doubt I was being dragged off to some dangerous place once again. But each time I caught sight of that smile on her face, I couldn't bring myself to complain.

Chapter 14

I'm pretty sure we missed the inn owners completely, which I was thankful for; but given how high the sun was already in the sky, they must have gone out of their way to avoid us altogether. First, I didn't blame them; second, given how fast Rose was moving and dragging me behind her, they might have only seen a blur. So excited, so determined was Rose to begin this 'adventure' that she almost missed the stage coach parked conspicuously outside the inn.

“Sir! M-miss!” the man riding atop it called out nervously.

I tried to reign Rose in, “Rose! Wait!”

She came to an immediate halt, and I almost slammed into her given my own momentum. She didn't even budge when my weight hit her like a runaway train. I bounced right off, and I would have fallen over backwards if she still wasn't holding onto my wrist with her vice like grip.

Now that I had got her attention, the driver spoke again, “You're Mister Laven and M-misses R-rosette?”

“Yes. That would be us.” I said.

“Get in the coach you lazy bastards!” Said a grouchy old voice from within. It was followed by a distinctive coughing fit.

There wasn't much arguing with that. Rose took my bag for me. As emasculating as it was I let her toss them in the back. I entered first and sat opposite of Old Man Donald who was propping himself upright with a cane. Rose climbed up and sat right next to me. Completely up against me. With the door closed, no escape door on my left and Rose pinning me down with her cuddling, the old man tapped his cane on the floor, and the coach took off.

“No, I'm not angry.” Donald started, “I'm just jealous that's all.” He laughed heartily again.

I had to ask, “You came all this way by yourself?”

“My family has been keeping me under pretty tight watch. But that spineless idiot Marlow went down like a bar maiden when a new ship sails into port. An old dying man tells him he'll make it so that the rest of his life is a living hell, and he starts crying like a baby.”

“I'm sure you could.” I agreed tensely.

“And I would.” He gave a mighty guffaw at his own capacity for cruelty.

“How long is this gonna take?” Rose asked abruptly out of the blue.

Donald chuckled, “I won't take up too much of your time. You can have some more time to yourselves soon.” He had a perverted look in his eyes as he studied the two of us.

Rose responded by pulling me closer to herself. She didn't even think to cover up or protect herself. She simply put herself between me and the harmless old man.

Donald explained, “An hour long ride out of town. When we reach the spot, there's an old animal trail. Should be a four hour hike from there, and we'll get there.”

“Four hours?” I asked.

“If I was thirty years younger, it would only take a couple.”

“Wait, hold on. You-”

“Yes.” Donald interrupted coldly, “I'm going to do it myself. It's the last time I'll ever walk it. I'm going to do it myself.”

“Then why-”

“Because I'm a dying man. I'm weak, and I might fall. I lose my breath and tire easily, but I can still carry my bones. I can't trust anyone else, not a single soul, to take me there. But you're in a similar spot I was decades ago. I've had my suspicions, but you're the only one still alive I know for sure.”

“That's-”

“I'm going to rest now. An old man like me needs rest. The driver knows where to stop on the way. Wake me up when we get there.”

Old Man Donald went out like a light. I looked over at Rose who gave me an expression of bewilderment that was probably equal to my own. The whole situation was really awkward, even more so when the old man started snoring loudly. At least we knew he hadn't dropped

dead.

Time passed within the carriage. Rose sat almost leaning up against me with her eyes closed in some sort of meditation. The old man was snoring, the coach bounced up and down so there was no way I could doze off and spare myself from the boredom. We finally came to a stop, and I didn't even need to rouse the old man. He woke up as if he was just following a tight and natural schedule. He didn't even wait for Rose or myself to open the door for him. The stubborn old man threw open the door and got out himself.

We followed him, and I watched as he took his whole coin purse and throw it at the driver, “Get going. Go, and not a word to anyone about any of this. You haven't seen me. You don't know me.”

The driver left in a hurry. We barely had time to grab our own bags before he sped away. I wasn't able to catch a good glimpse of his face. I didn't know if it was dollar signs in his eyes or perhaps fear that got him to pull away as fast as he did. Donald appeared as though he was on the warpath. He might not be long for this world, but he had more than enough money and influence to make someone's life hell if they got in his way. The old man was so ornery that when I tried to help him walk he shook off my arm and hobbled away. Off the road and through the fields, over the hill and into the forests again. A rugged beaten path, the animal trail he had told us about.

Rose had gone ahead; the slow pace was most likely driving her insane, and so she was running ahead and making circles around us. She made the excuse, 'I am patrolling,' so I wasn't going to argue with her. I lost sight of her a few times, but I also watched her sniff the air, so I'm sure we were never really separated. I was still left alone within earshot of the old man though. He didn't let me support him, and he had to stop every few minutes for a rest. Questions had been building up in my head, so after the tenth time he had to stop for a break I had to press him.

“I think we're far enough away from anything. Can you actually tell us where we're going?” I asked.

Donald sighed and figured he wouldn't be able to dodge the question even rudely anymore, “There's a cave in the woods up here. I'm going to her. The woman who lives there.”

“A monster.”

“That's right.”

There was a moment of silence; he wasn't going to say anything so I kept talking, “And you're a silk merchant and a tailor? You also said you owe her everything. Is she some kind of moth woman?”

“A spider.” Donald said bluntly.

“Sounds real romantic.” I meant it as a joke, but the look her gave me was vicious. He took that sarcastic response personally. “You also lose your sense of humor with your good health, Donald?”

Donald calmed himself and started speaking on his own, “She spins webs and we turned it into thread. We made the finest cloth and clothes together. I met her a long long time ago.”

“Before or after you got married?”

“Long before I got married.”

“So why didn't you marry the spider instead?”

“Her name is Victoria.” Donald was losing his patience again. He may be a smart ass and a rude man, but he was defensive and easily offended now.

“Alright. Why didn't you marry Victoria?”

“I couldn't just leave.” He went quiet for a minute, I didn't bother him. I expected him to start again when he gathered his thoughts. “I had a little sister. Had. She was a sick girl. When my parents sent me to Brun long ago, I convinced them to have her come with me to our uncle's, away from the shitty plague infested city life. My uncle was a tailor. I worked hard as his apprentice. I had to work hard for myself and my sister. All that so she could lie down in a bed and rest all day, year after year.” Donald got back up to his feet and hobbled his way up the path, talking all the way. “I got one day off a week, so one day I ran out of town to gather flowers. For my sister's birthday. I was only ten years old. That's the day I met her.”

I made my guess and finished his thought, “Victoria, in the fields outside town.”

“That's right. In the tall grass. I thought I just saw a girl at first. Long brown bangs covering her forehead, sitting in the field. I didn't get close. She was timid, but when I said I was looking for

flowers she told me where a bunch of pretty ones were. Now, I was only ten, but even then, I was struck by what a pretty girl she was. I told my sister all about it, and she said I should meet her again. Maybe she understood it was love at first sight? She was really smart."

"The second meeting would have been awkward." I guessed.

Donald laughed, "Yes. A monster. A human torso attached to the body of a hairy spider. Extra eyes on her forehead and all. On the next sun's day I had to myself, I met her again in the same field, she stood up and I nearly ran home screaming with shit down my pants. To tell the truth, I was too scared to run or even scream. I knew all about monsters; they ate little kids who go too far from town. I wasn't even far away from town, so I thought I was safe. If anyone found her, they would have killed her. I don't know how she did it. Hide that is."

I mused out loud to myself. "Some sort of trap door spider maybe?"

Donald ignored me and kept going on with his story, "She didn't eat me. If you couldn't tell. When I calmed down, we talked. Figured out she was just some girl after all. I kept going back to that field again and again, and she was always there and so happy to see me."

"And one day you both grew up and-"

"Went at it like rabbits. Right there in the daylight, right there in all the tall grass." He was wearing that perverted old man grin on his face. "She led me back to her home in the woods. And we did it there too. There we even sewed together. My uncle began to think I was some sort of wizard. So I started getting famous. When I made journeyman, I took over my uncle's shop. I'd go to the woods, spend time with Victoria and then go back to town and sell."

"I thought monsters just spirited men away? Are you saying you were free to go?"

"She knew about my sister. She'd die if it wasn't for the apothecaries in town being paid to keep her alive another day. If I left, she'd die. There was no one else who'd take care of her but me." Donald stopped and sat down again. "One day. My family... My family arranged for me to get married. I couldn't turn it down. So I did. There was nothing wrong with the girl, but it hurt because I loved someone else. I think she knew too. She didn't say a thing. I bet she didn't think

it was a monster. We had kids, three sons. But my sister never met em. She died long before that."

I didn't speak right away; his story was going all over the place, and he was becoming distant. "So you had a wife and kids that kept you at home from then on?"

"Yeah, that's right. A family. There were a few times I wanted to run away to the woods with Victoria. She said 'no' every time. She'd send me back home before long." Donald went into another coughing fit. His handkerchief had specks of blood on it, but he pushed me away when I went in to help him. "So I'd go to the woods, 'collecting materials', I'd say. I'd spend a couple weeks out there, return home and then go back a few months later."

Donald got back to his feet and dragged his bones down the path. I watched him struggle, gasp and wheeze. It was painful to watch, but the look on his face told me not to interfere. If people saw a light before they died, with how stubborn this old man was, he probably wanted the light he went into to be one he walked to himself.

The old man didn't speak much after that. We simply spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon slowly making our way through the forest. The further we went in, the more it slowly became a swamp. Dead trees, soft ground and fog. If any sane man came this way, he'd think the place was haunted and turn tail to run. Now I see why no one would have followed a young Donald rushing through these woods to meet Victoria. If they lost sight of him, they'd be terrified of this place. It was a place where a monster could jump out from anywhere.

And that's just what happened when a shape dropped from above and landed right beside me, and I nearly screamed, "Whoa! Rose?"

Rose had finally appeared again and clung tight to me, "Old man." She put her claw around the hilt of her sword on her back, "Where are you taking us? Why are we being followed?"

Donald appeared concerned, and his eyes were wide with fright for a moment before his face softened as something dawned on him, "Oh. Don't bother trying to catch them. This is their home after all. They're harmless too. Just playing games."

"Wait. Who's playing games?" I asked.

"I wasn't married to Victoria, but that doesn't mean we didn't share a lifetime together." He laughed and wore a smile on his face.

“Come on. We're close.”

He carried on, and we followed. Rose stuck close, her shoulder was bumping up against mine. I became aware of the bushes, twigs and branches of trees swaying unnaturally. I thought I may becoming paranoid, but I was convinced from what Rose said that we were being watched and followed. That sinking feeling in my stomach and hairs on the back of my neck continued until we came to a cave. At the entrance and hanging in all the trees and bushes everywhere were spider webs, sticky and strong, every one of them. From that cave came the woman we were looking for.

Her brown hair hung to her shoulders; pale white skin clothed in the most vibrant silk robes. Her face was fair; she too was gorgeous, a different type of gorgeous though. She had the beauty and grace of a middle-aged housewife, one with her own show on the cooking channel. Her expression was warm and welcoming; she wasn't even surprised to see Rose or myself with Donald. Where her monstrous nature became apparent was the six other smaller eyes running up her forehead two by three. From her hips, where anyone's legs would be, there was the body of a giant, brown and hairy spider. Her body closely resembled that of a wolf spider. A very large wolf spider. From the top of her human head down to the tips of her eight hairy legs, she had to be about seven feet tall, and she could have stood taller if she extended those legs all the way up.

Donald stumbled toward her on his cane, when she got a good look at him she raced toward him with blinding speed. She cried out, 'Donny!' and scooped him up in her arms and hugged him tight, lifting the old frail man's body off the ground. Her form was new and terrifying to me, but there was a softness to the scene that I couldn't deny that put my own heart at ease. Even Rose lost the tenseness and relaxed. That was until from all sides around us other girls started to emerge from the woods in all directions. They resembled the woman who must be Victoria almost to a fault. They closed in from all directions speaking to each other in whispers and giggles. Beside me Rose tensed up again, seized her hilt in her claw and crouched down, and the fire on her tail erupted from calm to battle-ready.

“Calm down girls. That one is a jealous one. You'll get yourself hurt.” Donald said still being embraced tightly.

The spider-girls surrounding the two of us moaned, protested and sounded disappointed with their chorus of, 'aw'. They kept their distance, but they still tried to encroach closer and closer when they thought Rose wasn't looking at them.

“Listen to your father girls. Don't bother our guests.” Victoria called out this time; her voice was smooth, very mature and matched her motherly appearance.

With that the girls gave their last collective sigh and pulled back and watched from a distance behind the bushes and trees. Rose still didn't drop her guard until I put my hand on her shoulder to calm her down. The battle-ready flame on her tail died down. She still wrapped both her arms around mine and pressed her body against it. She squished that arm between her breasts and threw threatening glares in all directions.

I wasn't comfortable with the situation at all so I tried to get things back to business, “Donald. Are we done here? You ready to keep your end of the deal?”

Victoria put Donald back to the ground and gracefully retreated back as he spoke, “Yes. Yes. You've done a great job.” His face was bright and all smiles now. “I'll tell you the last of what you need. Come inside.”

Victoria and Donald, hand in hand, went into the dark cave together. I looked at Rose who looked at me with a look of, 'do we have to?' I sighed and nodded my head. With that the two of us followed. It was hard to walk with Rose clinging so close, but she refused to let go. All the spider-girls surrounding us had made a semicircle behind us and followed us as we went into the cave.

Inside the cave wasn't as barbaric as I thought it would be. Eroded limestone walls decorated with the amenities of a home. Wooden furniture and drapes hanging from the ceiling to make improvised doors. It was lit with candles; not that I needed them with the living torch still clinging to me and illuminating the claustrophobic and dark crevasses. At the very end of the cave was a sizable room with paintings, an assortment of luxurious and comfortable looking chairs and a dining table. Donald was already seated, propping himself up with his cane with Victoria towering over him. Rose still refused to separate, and it made sitting down myself difficult.

“Rosette, dear.” She called out soothingly. “How about we let the men talk in private?”

“No. I'm sticking with my husband.” She spat out.

“Come on dear. Let's have a little talk between girls. There

are things you don't want to talk about in front of your husband, right?"

"What? No." Rose was incredibly blunt. It didn't surprise me. Tact, grace and femininity weren't something she was compatible with. She ran on a whole other operating system.

"Come on now dear. It has been ever so long since I've had a good chance to talk with someone." There was a slight break in that motherly face of hers, something sinister. "I want to hear all the details." She leaned over to Rose whose head flinched back defensively for a moment. Victoria leaned over and began whispering into her ear.

I could only hear bits of it, but Rose's reaction was very telling, "You can what? Really? Doesn't he- from there." She flushed red, and the flame on her tail popped a little and blew out a few embers.

With Rose engrossed she followed Victoria out of the room leaving Donald and me alone once again. I felt as though my face was frozen in a state of, "Oh my god," all because I'm smart and imaginative enough to take a few guesses at what ideas Victoria might be putting inside that girl's head.

"I only have two things to talk to you about, Laven. First, how you're going to get to the Free Ports. Second, a word of warning."

I shook my head clear of rogue thoughts, "Let's make it quick then. I want to get going."

"First. Back in Brun. There is a caravan master I am partners with. He'll smuggle you south with him. He owes me many favors and is a good friend. You will pass through many countries large and small on the way there. Some are neutral to monsters. Some are very hostile. Some do not let the Church of the Chief God do as they please if at all. Some welcome them with open arms. Keep yourselves hidden the whole way, and you'll be fine. The man's name is Thomas Fintly." Donald produced a letter with a red wax seal on it and gave it over to me, "Give this to him, and all will be well. You will need to be there tomorrow morning before he leaves. He will not wait for you."

Taking the letter, I thank the old man. I almost stood up when he waved his hand to have me sit back down.

"Do not be so hasty lad. Second: A word of warning. I don't know why or how, but you don't understand a thing about where you are." I didn't say anything to refute him so he continued. "With Victoria,

I have twelve daughters. Eight of em still live here. With my late wife, I had three sons. I had a forth child, but she didn't live past her fifth summer. Do you get what I mean?"

"No." I shook my head back and forth, "I don't."

"Demon realms. You asked me if they were really hell holes. They are not anything like that. They are not blighted lands. The sun still rises and sets; clouds still hang above, rain and clear. What becomes of those lands is that monsters take over. They capture every man; every woman—if they don't flee—they will turn into monsters themselves."

"Wait! Women turn into monsters?" I got too excited and rose from my chair.

"Yes. A few monsters can turn women into monsters like themselves or, for a very choice few, something else. Also, that I have twelve daughters and no sons with Victoria is no accident. Between a man and a monster, the only child ever born will be a monster and always a girl."

I fell back down in my chair. Various dots were connecting, and a picture that made sense in my head started to form. "You don't mean-"

"Looks like you already get it. Yeah. I guess you're not stupid after all. Just lost and ignorant... If monsters are left to do what they want, they have their way with men. When they find one they fancy, they settle down, seduce them, kidnap them if they have to. It then spreads and gets worse. They capture every man and have only monstrous daughters. If they are not monsters that are already mad with lust, or close to it, entire villages, towns cities, even whole countries can collapse. Buildings crumble, roads crack, fields go fallow because no one is left sane enough to maintain them. Eventually all there will be are monsters. Those monsters grow up and seek mates too." Donald went into a coughing fit before continuing. "If you're close to monster lands, the whole thing just gets even worse. They are lust filled creatures, and lust rules those lands. You're safer for keeping away from them. Enough people still think of them as man eating monsters. All that preaching, all those executions, all of it to prevent their spread."

"Hold on. This is getting hard to believe." I said trying to get Donald to slow down.

He continued anyways, “You've seen it with your own eyes. Haven't you?”

My mind raced back to the orcs and amazons in the woods. Their captives, their lewd actions and attempts at seduction and control. My heart was beating fast, my palms sweating and my breathing speeding up.

“Yes, you've seen it.” He said while leaning forward on his cane.

I swallowed hard, “It's not that simple though, is it?”

Donald stopped leaning forward and cocked his eyebrow, “Oh? How so?”

“Victoria didn't keep you prisoner here. Rose was given near diplomatic immunity to do work all over the place. It isn't so black and white. Is it?”

Donald smiled at me and laughed heartily; the phlegm in his throat making him croak, “You're too far gone now boy. Making excuses for monsters. I think you're right so you're not alone.” There was a serious look to his eyes now. “I've been around for a long time now. Forty years ago, the situation got bad. Really bad. Monsters didn't just roam the woods. It wasn't safe outside the cities. Some of them could disguise themselves, infiltrate. Strongholds would fall from the inside. Could you really expect every man to turn down the embrace of a beautiful woman with such passion and devotion? It had been like that for about a hundred years before, but it started getting really bad at that point. People were scared. Before it got too bad, beyond the point of no return, there was a hero that stepped forward. He said he'd go and stop the Monster Lord.”

“Monster lord?” I stopped him to ask.

“A demon. A demoness. A powerful one. Very powerful. She has dominion over the monsters. To them, she is like their god. Some faithful more than others. Some ignorant of her, but they still act according to her edicts even if they never hear a word from her.”

“And there are still monsters. So I guess he failed.”

“No word has been heard from the hero since. However, the monsters suddenly stopped. Whole cities or countries turning into demon realms is so rare now. It is as if their war path suddenly stopped.”

“Some monsters even settled down then.”

“Exactly. No one would ever believe a girl like Victoria exists. Certainly not forty years ago. As for Rosette. Well, she's The Thorn Knight. It's better they let her do as she pleased. She was a monster on the battlefield. Dozens, no, hundreds of knights have fallen to her sword. She's the kind of monster the Church wants people to fear. Not the kind of monster that tempts men and brings realms to ruin, leaving only a massive orgy behind.”

Rose's special situation suddenly made a lot more sense, but one thing still didn't.

“You said you've known Victoria for decades. Why does she look so young?”

“Don't know. Maybe monsters don't age like you or me?”

“So not only do they only give birth to daughters, they are still active and young decades later? That means they could stay dormant for-”

“That's why they go after the men instead.” Donald said interrupting. “You've seen a few monsters now. You think it would be easy to kill em? It ain't. You could just be sending them husbands if you try to fight em. Your womenfolk could just be turned into them. It's much easier to kill the men. Because once a monster gets their claws on a man they don't let go. They can terrorize a village for years, but one day, when they take away one poor lad, they are suddenly never seen again. Even if you off the man, she won't come back for another.”

“So you're saying that you kill the husband; they never show up again, and they don't breed?”

“Not a very good system is it?” Donald ginned as he said that and then leaned back in his chair. “That's about all I know, lad. I don't know what it is you're after. You'll only tell me you want to go home.” He sighed, “That's all I need to tell you. That's about all I know. If you gotta know more, you're gonna have to figure it out yourself.”

I also sighed deeply and leaned back in my seat, craning my neck to look up at the ceiling, “No, you've helped out enough already.” With a surge of energy, I quickly stood up, “I'll be going now. Thank you for everything, Donald.”

Donald didn't say a thing more. He had already started snoring. Seems as though he completely knocked himself out with the hike and all the talking. There wasn't anything more for him or me to do. I pushed past the drape into the next room where Victoria was sitting on her eight legs and Rose listening intently over tea on a table between them. The two noticed, and Rose ran up to me.

“Are we done?” She asked.

“Yeah, we need to get going.”

There was a chorus of 'aw' again from all over. Rose bared her teeth and growled which was met with playful shrieks and giggles. Rose then began pulling on my arm and dragging me again. Victoria simply smiled and waved goodbye. She didn't even seem to mind that Rose was being incredibly rude for not saying goodbye properly or even thanking anyone. Instead, Rose continued to stomp out on the warpath until we were a good distance from the cave; she sniffed the air and listened closely. She then relaxed and seemed to drop her guard. Seems no mischievous spider-girls were interested in following us.

With the two of us alone now, she immediately turned back to her chipper self, “So? What did you talk about?” She grabbed my hands and flapped them up and down.

“We get on a Caravan back in Brun tomorrow and- Could you stop that please?” Rose pouted a bit and settled down, if only a little. “Tomorrow morning. His friend's caravan leaves, and he will smuggle us all the way to the Free Ports with him. If we miss it, we lose our chance.”

“Hmm?” she pouted, “That sounds boring.”

The fins on each side of her head, her ears, drooped down low as an exaggeration of how disappointed she was. I'd rather not make things any more difficult than they needed to be. There was a good chance we'd not be safer and be hunted until we made it to these Free Ports she kept talking about. She had powerful friends there if she was to be believed. I decided not to argue with her and just get on our way. Rose seemed a lot more content when it was just the two of us. She marched right along, her arms swaying back and forth in the most childish way. She also hummed a little tune; of course, I had not idea what it was. It was a pleasant hike down the woods. Until Rose started looking nervously back and forth as she marched ahead of me.

“Rose?” I called out. She tensed up nervously when I called her. “We're not lost now are we?”

She turned around and rubbed the back of her head with one of her claws, “Ha ha! Yup.”

I cupped my face in my palm, “God dammit.”

“The Almighty will not damn your fortune to replace it with good. You heathen!” A voice from down below shouted out.

My blood froze, and my eyes shot wide open. I turned to look down; on the ground, beneath the short cliff Rose and I stood on, was the robed man, Zerin. Standing beside him was a woman armored and armed head to toe. The suit of armor she wore made her look huge. She was much taller and larger than Zerin. Her chest plate stuck out to accommodate a large bust underneath, and the armor tapered at her waist and hips to fit her form. It was unmistakeably feminine. It definitely was the same woman who rode on horseback behind him in Brun. On his other side was another woman with a bow in her hand and a quiver of arrows ready at her hip. She was dressed head to toe in leather armor; brown and vibrant green cloth covered her as well. She wore a large William Tell hat with a father stuck in it and a scarf wrapped around her neck and shoulders. Long blonde hair hung down her back; two large braided strands of it swung in front of her. I couldn't see the knight’s face, and I could only see the others eyes, but they were both fixated on Rose and observing her every move. She was tiny compared to the large knight opposite of her. It was not the kind of company I wanted to run into.

“What providence brings us to meet again in such a far away place. What else could guide the two of us to meet again in the middle of such a vast forest? Surely, The Chief Almighty smiles at me!” Zerin was still Zerin. He threw his arms about as he spoke like a fire and brimstone preacher.

Rose had tensed up beside me, and the fire on her tail was slowly starting to build. She didn't reach for her weapon; those two women down there were watching her. Every time Rose's claw twitched; their hands did too. They were ready to attack if Rose so much as made a move. Meanwhile, Zerin's full attention was on me. I had stopped paying attention to him for just a moment, and I was already at a loss. The words coming out of his mouth may as well been a muffled trumpet.

That was until the last few words out of his mouth, “I am here to pass judgment on the heretic who has filled these woods with monstrosities!”

Donald. That was the only word that came to mind.

“Horrid, wretched creatures, a mockery of the perfect female form as created by the gods of old so long ago. Terrible, vicious, hideous women with the bodies of a spider! They stalk and hunt the men who venture here for mushrooms and herbs! They must be driven out. No monster must feel welcome so close to the lands of the lambs of God!”

Zerin had caught wind. I don't know how. He had been pushed out of town. He was looking to redeem himself. He would never be able to move on if he didn't claim he had at least one solid victory. And so, he locked his eyes on me. Did he blame me? If he could pin any of it on me, he'd surely do it. If he found Donald, Victoria and their daughters, what would happen? I looked toward Rose who was sizing up the two female warriors below. Her face looked different from before back in town. Did she see them as a threat? Just to me? Or were they something else?

“Heathen!” Zerin screamed once again. I had been ignoring his rant and had no idea what he was going on about now, “You may think you have your safety for now. But you will leave these woods. Unless you know where the spiders and the traitor I seek are. The traitor, Donald Ceerly!”

How did he know? My mind reeled. He had gone undiscovered for decades. But I was also free to go. I see, even Zerin couldn't touch me right now. I could play dumb and be on my way. I hadn't seen Donald. I didn't know him.

'But what about Donald?' A voice in the corner of my head asked me.

I closed my eyes and grit my teeth. No. Just walk away. Just walk away Laven. Just walk away. You've done what you had to do. They might never find them. They could wander this forest for days and never find them. Just leave this forest behind. You've done what you've came here to do. You've done all you can.

'You haven't done all you can.' The voice in the back of my head spoke up again.

Shut up conscience! You're not helping! Monsters are tough right? Donald may be weak, but they aren't, right? That's what Donald said; they killed the men and not the monsters because it was easier.

'They are tailors. Some were adults, some adolescents, some still children. They can't face-off against trained killers like Rose can.'

“Shut up shut up shut up!” I said out loud. I didn't mean to say that out loud.

Zerin seemed beside himself with anger thinking I was talking to him, “A heretic has no right to silence one of God's servants in his land! I will enact judgment as is his will!” He pointed his finger shaking with anger at me. “I know the man went this way! Where is he? His whore spawn are nearby. I know it!”

I was wrestling with my own thoughts. Everything felt wrong. Very wrong. I felt a passion heat up inside me. There was something I could do. I knew that. A plan was hatching inside my head. The more it built up; the less power I had to refuse it. It would only cause trouble, but I couldn't put Donald in danger. It was his dying days and his dying wish. Victoria and all her daughters, their home would be destroyed; they'd be chased out. Where would they go? Zerin was still screaming, shouting and proselytizing. Rose was on eggshells and ready to pounce; those two warriors beside Zerin seemed ready to oblige her. I could not do nothing, so I did what I could.

I whispered to Rose, “Rose, forgive me please and play along.”

I didn't wait for an okay from her; I noticed her break her concentration and fumble, and a confused look spread across her face.

The mad inquisitor kept rambling, but he stopped; he stopped when I started laughing. I started quietly, but I kept laughing louder and louder till I was laughing manically at the top of my lungs. The whole scene, all the tension broke down in an instant. Like a villain from a cartoon I struck a pose and covered half of my face with my hand; my fingers positioned strangely.

“As expected of Zerin. Even after your defeat earlier you still pursue me. But you're too late!”

Zerin seemed stunned his own game was being flung back at him, but he soon regained his composure, “What did you say, heretic?”

“Donald Ceerly, the man behind the wealth of Brun, is dead!” I declared.

“What?”

“I kidnapped him and brought him to these woods! And here, he died! The silk worms of this wood, the ones he hid and made his fortune on. I forced that sick dying old man to lead me to it.”

“You didn't-”

“And burned it down.” I said with an evil look on my face. “Brun is nothing if not for its export of fine silk and luxury clothes. What good do you think you can do for a town so far north and surrounded by monsters that is doomed to go broke?”

Zerin was buying it all and shaking with righteous rage, “That was your plan?”

“And with the inquisitor disgraced, what can he do to stop it? The foolish inquisitor who was too concerned with a harmless old man to actually see the real one responsible for everything!”

He was reeling back now, “No no no no, that can't possibly be true. There's no way someone can be immune.”

“No one?” I put my hand around Rose's waist who jumped a little when I did. I whispered quietly to her, “I'm sorry.”

'I'm going to regret this', I thought to myself as I pulled Rose toward me and then leaned over her. I looked into her eyes, and she looked back up at me. Her face looked a little afraid from not understanding what was going on. I hesitated for a moment, but I steeled myself and continued. Hungrily I pressed my lips against her, and I didn't pull away even though danger was so close. Instead, I continued and deepened the kiss. Rose moaned. She closed her eyes and sighed out her nose as she let the strength out of her body and went limp. Her claws reached up and held onto my shoulders, and she hung her weight off me. I don't know how long I had held it. Time stopped at some point. Eventually, I pulled back and opened my eyes. Rose opened her as well and looked back up at me. Her eyes were moist. There was a thin thread of saliva on our tongues still connecting us. The slit irises of her reptilian eyes quivered; the whites of her eyes pushed back to the edges. Her confusion eventually subsided, and she smiled back up at me.

Faster than I could react myself, Rose grabbed me by the shoulder. Her tail exploded in a furious inferno, and she threw me behind her as she shielded my body with herself. With her other claw, she drew her sword and swung it down, clanging against the rocky ground below, shooting sparks everywhere on impact. From the treetops, a third woman somersaulted through the air and landed gracefully like a cat in front of Zerin. On either side of me, imbedded in the trees, were two halves of a small dagger.

I looked down at the woman who had suddenly appeared. The first thing I noticed was a tail swishing back and forth behind her. She dropped down from above and landed on all fours. There was hardly a sound when she did, just like a cat. She was dressed like a thief; but her feet and hands, they were paws. Her forearms and below her knees, they were covered in fur. Orange fur with black streaks. Short cropped, orange hair on top her head. A tabby cat. Crowning her head were a pair of cat ears. There were no human ears on the sides of her head. Her eyes were not human at all either; they were like that of a cat. A long tail swished back and forth behind her which balanced the rest of her body and endowed her with a supernatural sense of balance and grace. There were sharp claws at the end of each paw, and between the fingers on her paw like hands she produced several throwing knives through sleight of hand.

The archer pulled the scarf wrapped around her neck and covering her shoulders and threw it behind her, and it billowed behind her like a cape. Zerin ran his hand through her long blonde hair and flipped it over her shoulder. Sticking out from the sides of her head were very long and pointed ears, completely horizontal. An elf? The mountain of metal simply drew a sword from her back as tall as her and almost as wide. She hefted it as though it was nothing. That didn't look like a feat that any woman could do. There was no room for me to doubt. These were monsters. They formed a triangle around Zerin, and they each seemed ready to pounce and strike at his word.

I whispered to Rose, “Remember when I said to trust me?”

“Yes.” She replied.

“Well, this is the second part of my plan.”

“The second part?”

“Yes. The part where we run!”

I grabbed Rose by her wrist and took off in a sprint in the other

direction. Behind us I could hear Zerin shouting something. No doubt they'd be on our tail soon.

“Laven!” She protested, “I can take em!”

“Not the point of the plan Rose! We got to lead them away from Donald!”

“But-” She was going to continue arguing, but she stopped. I suppose she caught on to what I was doing.

And so we ran. We ran in what I feared was the direction away from Brun and away from a certain cave deep in the woods.

Chapter 15

I felt like a kid who had thrown a stone at a hornet's nest and panicked when it fell to the ground. A furious cloud of insects emerging from within, that's just what Zerin and his cronies were. But those cronies, they weren't like the knights back in town. Two of them were monsters, and the third, the one female knight from before, had monstrous strength. There was something very wrong. Something that didn't make sense. Why would a man hellbent on eliminating the threat of monsters be using them? Why would they agree to work with him? I wanted to meditate on those questions, but everything I had was being sent to my legs to keep them moving.

Past every hill and valley, over stone and under tree, Rose and I ran. I had worked up quite the adrenaline rush. It couldn't last forever, and sure enough I started slowing down after the first few minutes. I pushed myself another twenty minutes at a jog until my lungs felt like exploding. It seemed like a better alternative to certain death. Rose looked no worse for wear, but this time she was the one following me. I had her by the wrist, and I hadn't let go. When I finally stopped, wobbled and almost collapsed face first against a tree she caught me and held me as she knelt down to sit me softly on the ground.

“I said I could have taken em!” Rose protested.

I was still breathing heavily, trying to catch my breath, “No. That wasn't- That wasn't the point.”

“I really wanted to fight em!” Rose added.

I smiled wryly, “Oh? So that's the real reason?”

“Yes! They tried to hurt you. I won't let them get away with just a beating.”

I hardly had any strength left so I threw my back against a tree with a thunk. Rose shuffled to kneel in front of me and looked at me right in the eyes. She was most definitely not a happy camper right now. I had trouble keeping eye contact, but when I looked away she scurried back into my vision. I threw my head up and looked up at the forest canopy and sky above. Even then she stood up and stared down at me.

“Look at it this way Rose. Now we have to go the long way. No caravan shortcut.”

Her face scrunched in thought, “Ah! You're right! Can't

complain.”

That was easy. Hold on. I was dumbfounded, “Wait. What?” That didn't make any sense. Why was she so content with that?

“You remembered that I didn't really want to go that way. It would have been boring. That's what you were thinking. This is a much funner adventure.”

Her leering and scolding came to an end; she stopped looming over me and went to fish through her backpack. No doubt for a snack.

“No. I was thinking I couldn't let that mad man find Donald and his family. I'm actually really mad right now.”

“Why would you be?”

“Because I just made my life way harder than it has to be for some old man who is going to die soon anyways. That's why!”

I didn't have much strength left to be angry. But that didn't stop me. I let my body go limp and sighed. I felt my life evaporate out from my agape mouth as I did. Something started poking me in the cheek. After I had sat down and waited for my world to come to an end. It was an unwelcome reminder that I still had to bother with being alive for a while longer.

Rose was squatting next to me, prodding me with a piece of beef jerky, “Hey. Hey. Hey. Laven. Hey. Come on. Eat something. You'll feel better-”

I snapped, and my back hand slapped the beef jerky out of her hand. “Shut up! Just shut up!” My teeth flared, and my eyes were wide. “Don't you get it?” I was screaming.

Rose didn't seem bothered at all, “Get what?” She asked innocently.

“How are you okay with this?” I screeched.

“Well.” She started fiddling nervously with her claws. “Now we can go on a real adventure. And- That was the first time. The first time you- 'You' kissed 'me'.” She emphasized our roles, and she was blushing while doing so.

“I said I was sorry about that.”

“Sorry for what?”

“Sorry for what?” I parroted. “That was all an act! I told you that at the start.”

“An act?” She was finally taken aback.

“Yes. Don't you get it? I made myself out to be Zerin's White Whale. The embodiment of everything he hates. There's no way he wouldn't chase after me. If you fought, and killed them all, who else is going to get blamed for it around here? No one but you. That's who. Then where you can go will amount to nowhere. Then I can't go anywhere. Then I can't go home.”

“I don't get it.”

“I kissed you only to make sure there's no way he would doubt my story. That's why. Stop being happy about it! I'm pissed off. I'll be public enemy number one soon. All because I couldn't let one stupid, perverted and rude old man die! I'm an idiot. A stupid idiot. I'm probably even stupider than you!”

Rose didn't flinch or budge. She simply stared at me, motionless. I'm sure there were wheels in her head turning. She was thinking about something. She might have something. I doubt anything she'd have to say could make me feel any worse than I was right now.

“I may be stupid. But you're not stupid.”

“Oh please, don't patronize-”

“I wanted to fight em. I really did. I didn't even think about Donny or Vic or their kids. Even when you're in danger you thought about em. That's not because you're stupid. You're a kind person. You don't want to hurt anyone. You're stupid thinking you can't hurt anyone. You don't want Donald and his family to get hurt. You don't want to hurt that mean man either.” She held my cheeks in palms and looked right into my eyes. “You're a kind person. Even if you're a liar. You're smart because you can even lie to yourself. But you're stupid. Because you can't lie to me.”

I was left stunned. Shell-shocked. I wasn't even sure what I was thinking anymore. Was this girl insane? She wasn't even the least bit mad? I confessed I was only using her. I even confessed I was abusing her feelings to my own ends. She didn't hate me for that? She wasn't even a little upset. Not even the least bit disappointed?

“Why aren't you angry? Don't you get it that I was using you? I'm still only just using you-”

“No you're not.”

“No. You don't know that. You just think that. We only met a few days ago. Don't pretend you know me!”

“But I do know you. You're Laven.”

“You don't know who I am just because of that!”

“Yes I do.”

“No you-”

“Yes. I do. You don't have a name. You're using the name 'I' gave you. You didn't have to do that. Every time you could push me away, you don't.”

“Just listen you-”

“Snap out of it Laven!”

I didn't even see it coming; something hard hit me right across the side of my face. An open palm slap. The force behind it felt like I got hit with a baseball bat. I was stunned. Before I had a chance to say anything I was pulled to my feet. This time for another slap. A backhand slap that felt like crowbar against my other cheek. Now I realized what was going on. Before I could say a thing, a fist came up and slammed into my chin. I almost bit my tongue.

“Snap out of it!” Rose cried again. She kept saying that again and again. Except now she was pulling her fist back.

“Stop! Rose. Please stop! I get it. I'm okay.” I cowered behind my hands and waved them in front of her face.

She lowered her fist slowly still studying me as though she wasn't convinced.

“Yes. Okay. I'll admit it. I got a little hysterical there. You're not to blame for anything. It's just me who-” I panicked when I saw her draw her fist back again. “No! Don't! Okay it's not my fault either!”

She lowered her fist again and let go of my shirt collar. I got her message loud and clear. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself, or I'll beat the

shit out of you.” A rather extreme method, but it did shake up my train of thought and get my mind off a few things it had got bogged down in. I took a few deep breathes. Rose had retrieved the jerky I had swatted away. She brushed off the dirt from it and offered it to me again. I wasn't too eager to eat something that had been on the forest floor, but I knew better and decided this battle was over. It was time to suffer the conditions of my surrender, so I sat back down and started eating.

“You better now?” Rose asked.

“Yes. Thank you. I'm fine now.”

“Being kind gets you into trouble. But it doesn't make you a weak guy.” She then showed me her bright smile. “I like trouble, and you give me strength. Don't worry about me. If you make trouble with the whole world, nothing would make me happier!”

Rose enthusiastically clenched her claw into a fist and held it in front of me. I raised my own and tapped it against hers. She looked rather surprised.

I scrambled to make an explanation, “Well. This is just something good friends do to back home to celebrate and bond.”

“Wives and husbands too?” She asked with her full curiosity piqued.

“Well, no, I mean, not very often. I don't think I'd find girls like you back home who would-”

“Do it again!” She said excitedly while raising her fist.

I squirmed under her enthusiasm. I couldn't deny her, so I raised my fist. Rose then slammed her fist into my own. It wasn't a bump; it was almost a full out punch. My arm was thrown backwards violently. I gave out a shrill, “Fuck!”. It was like punching a concrete wall again, only this time the wall came towards me. I cradled my sore hand which was writhing and throbbing in agony. I hunched over, but when I got another look at Rose she was smiling even brighter than she was before. She was leaping about as giddy as she could be.

Before she got any other ideas, I decided I would have to change the topic. We were still in the middle of the forest, maybe lost, still being hunted and in the opposite direction of town with our insane pursuer between it and us. We had some problems to solve.

“So how are we going to go south now? Just walk in the right direction until we reach ocean?”

“Oh no. That won't work. People get very picky about people just walking over their borders.”

“You're not going to tell me-”

“If you don't get stamped for passage, people get very mad. They'll say mean things like: 'Spy'!”

“They really have time to worry about things like that?”

“Yeah. Silly huh?”

I sighed, “Very. Tolls too. Right?

“That too. There are other ways though. People and stuff move across without paying all the time.”

“Well we can't just walk up and try to pay our way through. The Church will be out to get us, and that will only get them on our tail. I don't even have any papers, and that will just force us to sit there while we wait for them to arrive. So you're saying we pay to smuggle ourselves across and get fake papers?”

“When getting some jobs, I was at a little tavern by a tiny little town on the border. I think they said that word a few times.”

“'That' word?”

“Yeah. Smoggle.”

“Smuggle.” I corrected.

“That's what I said. Smuggle.”

I decided to ignore it this time, “So we're going to convince a bunch of criminals and smugglers to get us across the border?”

“Oh! That sounds fun.” She said cracking while her knuckles.

“Hold on! Are we on the same page with the word 'convince'.”

Rose looked at me with that smile on her face. Her head then slowly titled like a dog who had just heard the oddest thing.

“Rose. You...” I couldn't help but sigh. “And you're blaming me for causing trouble wherever I go.”

Epilogue: Rose's Dream

It was night, and all was well. Under a canopy of pine, deep in the forest, there safely laid a man and woman. Despite some abnormal features, this was indeed a woman; one who was radiantly beautiful. She had claws of red scales with sharp talons, reptilian eyes of brilliant amber, crowned with scaly red fins for ears and a crocodile's tail ridged with living fire. All these appearances would betray who this girl was. Smooth and flawless skin of slight bronze, long fiery red hair and slender feminine curves hiding deceptive muscle beneath. She was a salamander, both monster and human girl. Her name was Rose like the color of her hair. She was sleeping soundly beside a man; a man who could not sleep. If you asked who he was, she would declare, "My husband and the love of my life" she'd say so sharing a smile so bright. If you asked him afterwards, "Who was she?" he would look away embarrassed and avoid giving an answer.

The man was named Laven. It was a pet name that Rose bestowed upon him, all because of a certain flower's fragrance she smelled upon him so strongly when they first met. The man did not have a real name nor a home. He was lost, worried and confused. It was love at first sight for her but not for him, not right away. That was a statement he would always attempt, in a fluster, to deny. The man named Laven watched the girl sleep; the face she wore was so different from the norm. It was quiet and serene. A face that was usually twisted in a smile from enjoyment of love and life or, more likely, the joy of battle. Battle was what this girl loved above all else, second to Laven that is. Countless tales of daring and bravery she could regale, all of them the stuff of legends. A legend she was, in the making at least. She was The Thorn Knight, as crimson and beautiful as a Rose, but with deadly thorns no one could handle. How did such a girl fall so hopelessly in love with a man like Laven? No one could explain.

In the moonlight he watched her laying there; he pondered aloud, "Just what does a girl like Rose dream of? A girl like her, she must be fighting even in her dreams."

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Bells were ringing clearly, just as clear as the afternoon with blue skies above. There were countless bells, all of them church bells. They rang out from the tower which stood tall over the old quaint building surrounded by forest and farmland. White doves soared through the air and circled around in majestic flocks that danced

through the sky. Beyond the old oaken doors at the end of a long red carpet between wooden pews was a man. He stood there in his fancy dress suit and a bulb of lavender sticking out from his chest pocket. It was the man Laven. Beside him stood a woman, one dressed in an odd nun's habit. It was tailored suggestively to expose both her ample cleavage and thighs. She had ghostly white hair, purple eyes and elven-like ears which drooped on each side of her head. A black tail flicked back and forth playfully behind her with a mind of its own. It was crowned at the tip with a devil's spade, and all of it wound up in chains that rattled as it swayed. She clung to a large brown tome; some religious text she held closely to her heart. The man standing beside her barely gave this lascivious and beautiful priestess any notice. His eyes were fixed on the far doors, the entrance to the church.

At a pipe organ, another priestess waited. Suddenly her fingers went to work on the keys and played a familiar tune. The church doors swung open, and a girl appeared. Veiled in and wearing a long pure white dress. She slowly and deliberately strode forward with the music, her long fair hair swaying to and fro. Poking out from the hem of her dress were red claw-like feet. Her hands, also red claws, tightly grasped a bouquet of red and purple flowers which she clutched tightly to her chest. The man watched her, and he was speechless with his jaw dropped in awe. Laven watched the girl approach. The girl continued with graceful steps up the short stairs to the stand before the priestess opposite of Laven. He offered his hand and took her claw in his.

The priestess spoke; her voice nearly shaking with barely contained lust, "Laven, will you have this woman to be your wedded wife, to love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, and forsaking all others, keep you only unto her, for so long as you both shall live?"

Laven answered quickly and definitively, "I do."

"Rose, will you have this man to be your wedded husband, to love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, and forsaking all others, keep you only unto him, so long as you both shall live?"

The bride answered just as quickly and definitively, "I do."

The priestess continued, "Take hands and repeat after me..."

The two did so, and in perfect unison they exchanged vows, "I take you, to be my wedded spouse, to have and to hold, for better for

worse, for richer for poorer, to love and to cherish, from this day forward."

From his breast pocket, Laven produced a brilliant golden ring and slipped it over the talon and onto the claw of the salamander.

"With this ring, I wed thee." Laven said to the blushing bride.

The priestess squirmed on the spot; between her legs it was becoming wet, and it took all her strength to remain standing and focus on her duty. The other priestess who had long finished playing the pipe organ was not so diligent. With one leg balanced on the bench before the organ she was busy pleasuring herself. The ceremony and mood was too much for her to bear any longer. Her moans did not abate the ceremonies happening nearby as the other priestess continued.

"Let these rings be given and received as a token of your affection, sincerity and fidelity to one another." The priestess said. " In sight of myself and our Lady Lilith, we see these two in wedlock, and we have witnessed their vows to each other. By the authority vested in me by the Demon Lord, if there are none to voice their objection to this union, I pronounce you husband and wife. You may both kiss to seal the vows."

Laven reached out with nearly trembling hands and pulled away the veil to reveal the flushed and smiling Rose. Tears welled up in her eyes. She was so short that he needed to bend down to meet his lips with hers. She pushed up on her clawed feet to reach his face on her own. Their faces did not meet though, and the kiss was not done. A man appeared bursting through the large oaken doors and into church. He flew a banner and was clad in armor and raised a sword high into the air.

"I protest this union!" He bellowed. "We all protest this union!"

The man cast his other hand forward in a sweeping command. From the rooftops dozens of men, ninja, with curved swords and throwing stars landed all around the bride and groom. From the wall, there was a mighty crash and explosion. Stone was thrown everywhere, and from the hole made in the church a small army of ornery pirates armed to the teeth poured in. From behind the man at the entrance, heavily armored knights rushed forward with their panoply of war. Smashing through the windows along the other undamaged wall, dressed in furs and wielding large wooden shields

and axes with helmets crowned with horns, another small army of men swept into the small church. Soon the bride and groom were surrounded by a cosmopolitan army of burly, savage and well armed men. The priestesses had long escaped, but bride and groom's own escape was cut off. The number of warriors surrounding them seemed endless as even more waited outside for a chance to pour in. Neither the bride or the groom budged. Their expressions did not change either. They watched as the men approached with weapons waiting, waiting to dip them in flesh and blood. There was blood lust in their eyes.

Rose, the salamander, grabbed hold of her veil, tore it off and threw it to the ground. The encroaching force flinched, drew back and watched. Taking hold of the long skirt of her white wedding dress, she tore it along her right leg so that she could move freely. Without another word, she grinned eagerly and maliciously and threw herself into the armed men with her talons ready. The clamor of battle echoed throughout the church as the salamander slashed with her long talons and drew blood which stained her dress. Men screamed in pain and horror, but were replaced by a howling flood of men ready to take their place and charge. With fists clenched, she threw blow after blow that felled man after man as they rushed up the stairs to met her in battle. With leg and claw she sent men flying in all directions.

Still standing stoically where he was before, Laven waited as the other half of the armed men surrounded him. They closed in on all sides and were ready to lunge with dozens of sharp iron points and edges. When they approached too close, Laven suddenly jerked both his hands to his coat. The sudden movement caused the crowd to leap back. They too waited and watched to see what move the groom was going to take before they rushed in. Laven curled his fingers, grabbed hold of the fabric and with one movement tore off his coat and undershirt with a mighty rip. Hidden somehow beneath was a mountain of muscles. Looking oiled and ready, Laven showed off his preposterous pectorals, amazing ripped abs and frighteningly muscled arms. He stood tall and observed the men surrounding him, looking very much like a certain famous barbarian. One man rushed in screaming and was met with a fist that cracked her face and sent him flying back into the men behind them, bowling them over like pins. Taking the initiative, Laven leaped forward, fists swinging. The crowd of men around him panicked and tried to push in, but the flurry of blows, with those muscles behind them, knocked aside the men like paper in the wind.

Warrior after warrior rushed forward and were thrown aside as

if they were trash; the two fought until they were back to back, throwing kick and punch over one another shoulders to knock back and blow away their adversaries. Minute after minute passed; the two did not yield even when they found themselves standing atop of pile of broken bodies. Even then the advance of warriors of all types did not stop. They all climbed up the mountain of their comrades to reach the two who sent them plummeting back down to the bottom in droves. The battle waged for so long and so many men were throwing their lives away that the small church soon became too packed with strewn bodies everywhere. Even then their advance did not cease. Surrounded and panting heavily with grins on their faces, the bride and groom exchanged glances and smiles.

Laven held a hand and fingers to his mouth and let out a shrill whistle between his lips. So loud was the noise that the first row of warriors surrounding them fell to the ground in pain clutching their ears. Not a moment later, from behind the alter, a white stallion crashed through the stained glass. Unsuspecting men caught in its path were trampled and tossed to the side as the mighty horse kept galloping at full speed unabated. Laven caught hold of the horse's neck and swung himself up onto the beast's back. From a standing start, Rose leaped up and landed seated in front of Laven, resting her back against Laven's muscular chest. Laven grabbed hold of the stallion's mane; using it as reigns he spurred the horse onward. There wasn't a thing the men could do to stop them; they dove out of the way to avoid being crushed underneath.

All manner of warriors at the large oaken doors hurriedly tried to close the massive doors to block the path of the escaping bride and groom. With unnatural speed, the white stallion squeezed through the smallest of gaps before the door was finally closed. The bride and groom looked at each other. Rose gave out a very twisted smile of unadulterated excitement. Laven smiled in return. Inside the church the men were organizing to give chase when one of them spotted a rogue flame burning on the ground on the isle between the pews. It was but a small flame, but it wasn't for long. Rose's tail snapped suddenly like a whip and cracked the air. Behind the escaping two, the church erupted into a mighty fireball. A massive shock wave pummeled the area like hundreds of pounds of dynamite had just detonated. Stone and wood were thrown into the air, and all around it rained down on the pleasant fields and forest around the church. The clear blue sky day was soon marred with black smoke and red haze.

Still galloping toward the horizon amidst the flaming wreckage landing all around them, the bride and groom looked at one another

once more.

"We still need to seal the deal." Laven said in a deep manly voice.

Rose nodded, "Yes we do, husband."

Riding the white stallion into the red hazed horizon, the bride and groom exchanged a long and passionate kiss.

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Laven watched the eyebrows of the salamander girl twitch, and a smile spread across her face. She laughed quietly in her sleep as a trail of drool poured from the corner of her mouth and pooled on the ground beneath her.

"Probably just a dream about fighting." Laven said to himself

He turned over to rest his head upon the ground and drift off into sleep himself.